

WATCH DOGS GET READY FOR A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM
gamesTM
www.gamestm.co.uk
Xbox One | PS4 | Wii U | PS3 | 360 | Wii | PC | iPad | PS Vita | 3DS | PSP | iPhone | DS | Arcade | Retro
PS4 INFAMOUS VS TITANFALL XBOX ONE
THE ORDER: 1886
Could this be the PS4's Uncharted?
LEAGUE OF LEGENDS
How Riot stormed the world
BEYOND ELDER SCROLLS
BETHESDA'S ONLINE SEQUEL LEADS THE CHARGE OF MUST-PLAY RPGs
HIGHLIGHTS
MGS V: GROUND ZEROES
SOUTH PARK
DARK SOULS II
YAIBA: NINJA GAIDEN Z
CHILD OF LIGHT
THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT
PVZ: GARDEN WARFARE
MARIO KART 8
FIFA WORLD CUP
ip IMAGINE PUBLISHING
DigitalEdition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 146



There's been a bit too much sneaking around of late. Not that we have anything against stealth gameplay, but after the likes of *Thief* and *MGS V* things were just a shade too quiet. Not so now. *Titanfall* and *InFamous* have crashed out of the shadows and collided head-on; the first games to exclusively champion the capabilities of Xbox One and PS4 respectively. Meanwhile, there's plenty of fight left in soon-to-be last-gen consoles, with *Dark Souls II* carving a legacy for itself as one of the last great games of a passing generation. For many new games the transition between console cycles is more than a matter of timing. In recent weeks we've been spending our time exploring the new *Elder Scrolls*, the first in the series to offer vast multiplayer battles. And with *The Witcher 3* taking up residence in the kind of open world only the new platforms can offer, there's a sense that tomorrow's RPGs, – those focused on new consoles and equivalent PCs especially – are set to push the boundaries of gameplay further than they have in the past. Something else to shout about, then.

Richard Shoemaker
EDITOR


Who the hell are you?


4
6

Contents

www.gamestm.co.uk 146 | 14


96
Metal Gear Solid: Ground Zeroes




100
South Park: The Stick of Truth


104
Strider



> Have your say on anything videogame related at www.gamestm.co.uk/forum and you could feature in gamesTM
facebook.com/gamesTM
@gamesTMmag
www.gamestm.co.uk
Visit the gamesTM online shop at imagineshop.co.uk for back issues, books and merchandise
24 RPG PREVIEW
We look at the biggest and best RPGs due for release in the upcoming months.
26 The Elder Scrolls Online
32 The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
34 Child Of Light
26 Dragon Age: Inquisition
38 EverQuest Next
40 Wasteland 2
41 Final Fantasy XV
41 Pillars Of Eternity
24 Feature
Beyond Elder Scrolls
How a new breed of classic RPGs will push the next-gen like never before
SUBSCRIBE NOW and save 30%
Turn to page 84

(TWITCHGAMING)

Game & Watch

→ With the growth of streaming video services like Twitch and its integration into next-gen consoles, is watch becoming the new play?

By their very nature, videogames are all about the interactivity. It's what separates them from the more passive media outlets such as music and film, because even though the production process between a film and a first-person shooter is vaguely comparable, a game requires some form of input to function.

That being the case, there's no reason why a game can't double up as a spectator sport. So long as someone (or something) is manning the mouse, keyboard, controller, arcade stick or even dance mat, there's the potential for an audience. This is the premise behind Twitch.tv, a streaming service that is encouraging an increasing amount of people to watch as opposed to play.

When Twitch.tv branched off from the less focused Justin.tv back in 2011, it was predominantly used for eSports tournaments and general gaming broadcasts. In this sense, it's not too hard to see the likes of *League Of Legends* and *Counter-Strike* as a sport where you can participate or spectate. It's the difference between kicking a ball around the park with your friends and watching the latest premiership match on Sky Sports. Most of us know the basic rules of football, but that doesn't mean that a friendly kick-around has quite the same allure of watching a professional match.



Above *Counter-Strike* and *Call Of Duty* are stalwart favourites on Twitch, for obvious reasons.

That's a straightforward way of surmising Twitch's initial success, and yet, in more recent years, the diversity of content has broadened dramatically. We've seen everything from speed-run competitions where four players try to complete *Super Metroid* in the shortest time possible to talk shows that discuss the recent gaming news. "There is also Video Game Championship Wrestling, which involves characters from multiple franchises crossing over to battle it out in the ring," describes VP of Marketing at Twitch, Matthew DiPietro. "VGCW features storylines just like in real wrestling promotions with an on-going struggle to gain the VGCW Championship Belt."

For streamers, the challenge is to make their channel stand out from the crowd, and with Twitch playing host to over 900,000 unique broadcasters a month during 2013, getting noticed is no small feat. This is

DATA STREAM → EA CEO REVEALS EA INVESTIGATING THE POTENTIAL FOR VIRTUAL REALITY GAMING

Contents

Your guide to the essential stories

For daily news updates and exclusive interviews


facebook.com/gamesTM


@gamesTMmag

www.gamestm.co.uk



something that Philipp Karbun, a prominent streamer with over 50,000 followers on Twitch, knows all too well. "Streaming is a highly competitive business and it will take a lot of time and effort to get something going," Karbun reinforces. "The road is full of obstacles, but with dedication, hard work and a little bit of luck, it's possible to become a well-known streamer and maybe even make a living out of it."

IT ALSO PAYS if you can come up with a concept that's totally outside the box. A recent example of this is the TwitchPlaysPokemon channel that let Twitch viewers play through a full game of *Pokémon Red* by inputting commands into the stream chat. It took 16 days of sporadic commands, with a peak of over 120,000 users participating simultaneously, before the Elite Four were finally beaten and one of the most thought-provoking experiments in gaming history reached its conclusion. It even gave rise to multiple memes and a bogus religion that centred on the game's Helix Fossil.

"We are also starting to see broadcasters expand upon the TwitchPlaysPokemon concept," DiPietro offers when asked about the channel's impact on the streaming community. "This includes a version in which Twitch members are controlling *Pokémon* and at the same time controlling *Tetris*, and now a *Pac-Man* game that lets people control both Pac-Man and Blinky for a unique two-player crowdsourced experience. There is no question that others are tinkering around with the concept to push the envelope even more, so it will be exciting to see what surfaces next. Twitch Plays *League Of Legends*? You never know."

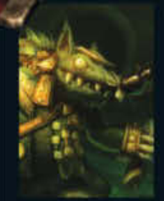
Above Next-generation consoles were quick to sign-up to the Twitch revolution, with Xbox One the latest to gain functionality to stream direct from the console without the need for separate capture cards or boxes.



Above *Dota 2* is second on the Twitch charts, just behind the near-unstoppable *League of Legends*.

"With the addition of PlayStation 4 broadcasting, we now have about one million active broadcasters every month, and with the impending launch of Xbox One broadcasting, we expect that number to get even bigger" Matthew DiPietro, Twitch VP Marketing

CAST MASTER



We speak to Chris "SirhcEz" Enteria, a top League Of Legends streamer with over 130,000 followers on Twitch

How did you first get into streaming your gameplay sessions on Twitch and why do you get called the singing streamer?

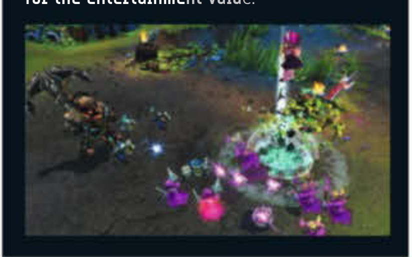
A random person added me on *League Of Legends* and loved my singing. He convinced me to stream so he could watch me play and sing. I didn't have many viewers at the time but I enjoyed streaming and continue to this day.

Now that the new generation of home consoles can stream to Twitch directly, do you think we'll see much change in the range of content that's available?

I'm sure we'll see a big change in content. A lot of anticipated games such as *Final Fantasy* and *Kingdom Hearts* will be the new big games that people will want to watch.

Why do you think gaming enthusiasts are devoting more and more of their free time to watching games as opposed to actually playing them? Has watch become the new play?

I hear from a lot of my viewers that they actually enjoy watching rather than playing. Some people just watch to learn and get better at a game. I'm one of the top *League Of Legends* players and I still watch streams for the entertainment value.






NEW ONLIVE SOFTWARE ALLOWS LIMITED STEAM CATALOGUE TO BE PLAYED ON ANDROID TABLETS

The Pocket Monsters influx aside, the three most popular games on Twitch are *League Of Legends*, *Starcraft II* and *Dota 2*. These are all cornerstones of competitive PC gaming, and when you consider that streaming tends to require a fairly capable PC in the first place, it's hardly surprising that the output reflects the community. But now that the new generation of consoles can stream to Twitch directly, cutting out the need for a capture device and even a PC, the barrier to entry is lower. And this change in accessibility is already starting to have an effect.

"We've always had a good mix of PC and console gamers using Twitch," DiPietro points out. "The launch of the next-gen consoles has produced a different sort of broadcaster. Because the broadcasting functionality is so simple, and so widely distributed, the broadcasters seem to be more casual. They use Twitch for social reasons, the same way they would use Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit. With the addition of PlayStation 4 broadcasting, we now have about one million active broadcasters every month, and with the launch of Xbox One broadcasting, we expect that number to get even bigger."

At present, the PlayStation 4 is limited to streaming gameplay with commentary and a live feed from the PlayStation Camera. It seems unlikely that something like TwitchPlaysPokemon will be achieved by a solo streamer on a PlayStation 4, but that doesn't mean that developers can't incorporate some kind of Twitch functionality into future games. Zombie Studios, the developer behind the forthcoming survival-horror game, *Daylight*, has already hinted at some kind of system that will allow Twitch spectators to scare the broadcaster. It sounds like a bit of a gimmick on paper, but the fact that some studios are starting to see Twitch as more than just a streaming service is actually a very exciting prospect.

For now, the advent of streaming on home consoles can only lead to a wider range of coverage. "I think it will have a huge impact on games like *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield*," offers Ryan Dingle, the streamer behind the popular *World Of Warcraft* channel, ChinglishTV. "There'll be lots of games that are only available on console. I have always been a PC gamer myself. The only game that I really played on console was the *Tekken* series and I still love it till this day, but I think when it comes to Twitch, the PC will always reign supreme."



Above Blizzard's games continue to fill the playlists of most Twitch broadcasters.



Below *Starcraft II* has slipped down the Twitch rankings, although it remains popular due it its eSports fanbase.

IN TERMS OF the flexibility and creative potential that the PC offers over the more limited console toolset, it's unlikely that console streaming will overtake the more established PC channels any time soon. It's still early days, of course, and we've yet to see what Microsoft and Twitch have cooked up with the Xbox One and Kinect camera, but it'll be interesting to see how the audience reacts to the increase in console content. Will PlayStation 4 and Xbox One owners stick to watching console games or will they spectate on PC-only games as well?

Another aspect to consider is how much Sony and Microsoft want their install base to view games that can't be played on their respective platforms. It's something that's largely out of their control, but as a case in

> "I don't think streams work as a substitution to playing games, but rather as an addition to make gaming even more fun"
>
> Philipp Karbun, Twitch broadcaster

DISHONORED 2 RUMOURED TO BE ANNOUNCED IN JUNE → MINECRAFT CLAIMS 100M REGISTERED USERS

point, the Twitch app on PlayStation 4 doesn't link to non-PlayStation 4 streams at present. You can still watch the latest *League Of Legends* tournament by opening the Twitch page from the PlayStation 4 browser, but it's clear that Sony has made an (admittedly astute) business decision to steer PlayStation 4 watchers towards PlayStation 4 streamers.

In the end, though, does the popularity of Twitch threaten gaming? "People watch games for different reasons," Karbun surmises. "Some want to see a game in action before they make their decision to buy it. Others want to learn from the best players out there, while some simply want to enjoy watching eSports tournaments. Many people also play games simultaneously. They use a dual monitor setup, one for watching a stream and the other to play a game themselves. I don't think streams work as a substitution to playing games, but rather as an addition to make gaming even more fun."

It's a sound argument that highlights how much the gaming landscape continues to change. It used to be that you'd only watch a game being played at a friend's house, at the arcade or during an episode of *GamesMaster*, but as everything from YouTube, GameTrailers and The Escapist introduced us to 'Let's Plays', live expo coverage and videogame-themed web series, it was only a matter of time before live broadcasting was made into an everyman's game. The focus should be on developers and publishers and how they can use the streaming format to their advantage.

"Twitch spectators and broadcasters are a passionate and positive collective of individuals who thrive on creativity, interaction and cultivating an experience that keeps everyone engaged," DiPietro stresses, and it's clear that the community has made Twitch into what it is today. With an audience of 45 million unique users per month during 2013, over double what it was in 2012, one thing remains clear. Twitch gets more internet traffic than IGN, and it's showing no signs of stopping.

Below The popularity of TwitchPlaysPokemon has changed many perceptions about the kind of experience Twitch will be capable of delivering in the future.



TWITCHING FOR SUCCESS

→ We take a look at some of the recent success stories on Twitch.tv

FATHERSONGAMING



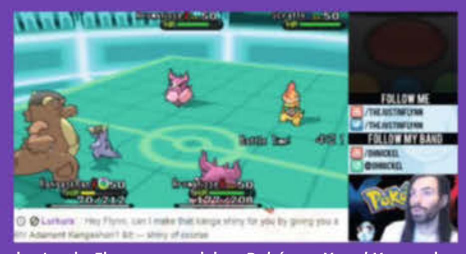
The premise of this channel is simple, yet has captured the attention of over 120,000 Twitch followers, never losing followers, only gaining them, sometimes with an increase of thousands of people a day. All this channel is, is a father and his son playing *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* together online and streaming the ensuing carnage and banter for all to see. With a 40-year age difference between the 57-year-old dad and the 18-year-old son, the generation gap is enough to make this channel stand out from the competition.

MANVSGAME



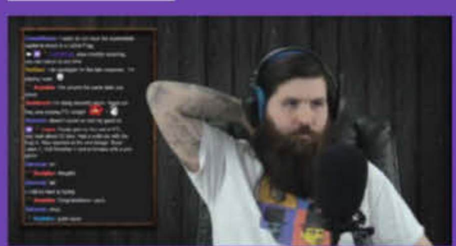
No prizes for guessing which television series this channel takes its inspiration from. The MANvsGAME channel follows the endeavours of Jayson Love, the titular man, as he tries to overcome one game after another. This has included everything from *Dead Space 2* and *Splinter Cell: Blacklist* to *Spelunky* and *Shadow Warrior*. It sounds like every gamer's dream job to just sit down, play through a game and make some humorous comments in the process, and that's pretty much what this is all about. And with over 140,000 Twitch followers, it's clearly a format that works.

THEJUSTINFLYNN



While Twitch is mostly used for PC and console streams, there are a few channels that focus on handheld gaming. One of the most prominent is TheJustinFlynn. Run by Justin Flynn, an aspiring *Pokémon X and Y* pro who now has over 70,000 followers to his name, the thing that makes Flynn's channel unique is its educational slant. It's not just about becoming a better *Pokémon* player himself, he also wants to help others learn the ins and outs of the game. This explains why his Shiny Hunting Guide now has over 450,000 views on YouTube.

LETHALFRAG



Starting a stream on Twitch with the intention of reaching the big leagues must seem like a daunting prospect, but when Matt McKnight did just that back in January 2012, he set himself the challenge of streaming every day for two years straight. Not only that, but when a viewer suggested that he forgo shaving for the duration of the live stream, he accepted the challenge. Skip to January 2014 and McKnight's channel is one of the most viewed on Twitch. He even broadcasts a segment called 'Cooking With Frag' where he uses his background in the culinary arts to teach the basics of cooking.

→ EUROPEAN COMMISSION CALLS 'FREE-TO-PLAY' MISLEADING → 6M PS4S HAVE NOW BEEN SOLD →



(MAKING A CHANGE)

Why games don't need to go back to their roots

The games industry has always focused very heavily on recurring IP; sequels, spin-offs and reboots tend to be the norm, with publishers opting for the 'safe' sales tactic. Does this reliance on old brands equate to less innovation? We don't think so, but we feel like we're the only ones

Nostalgia sells games. That's a cold hard fact, and one of the reasons why Nintendo does so well every year; *Zelda, Mario, Donkey Kong, Kirby, Pokémon* – slap one of those brands on a game and people will be interested. It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that this is because you know what you're going to get with each release, but that's only true on a superficial level – Nintendo's games are more than just yearly rehashes, they're well-designed games that keep a core formula and experiment around it, often with tremendous results.

Go to any games news site or blog aggregator and you'll see embittered long-time fans of a franchise claiming 'it needs to go back to its roots!' *Final Fantasy*, for example, is probably the best example of this – after *Lightning Returns* launched, a vast glut of the fandom appealed to Square Enix to 'stop killing the series.' But we actually thought *Lightning Returns* was a brave departure; sure, it didn't do too well, but the game experimented with combat systems and gameplay conceits that *Final Fantasy* hadn't touched upon before. If Square Enix had just said 'Let's remake *Final Fantasy VII* in a *XIII* skin', the developer would have learned nothing from the game and it'd be in the same position *Dynasty Warriors* is in – churning out safe, mediocre titles that don't dare to try anything new.

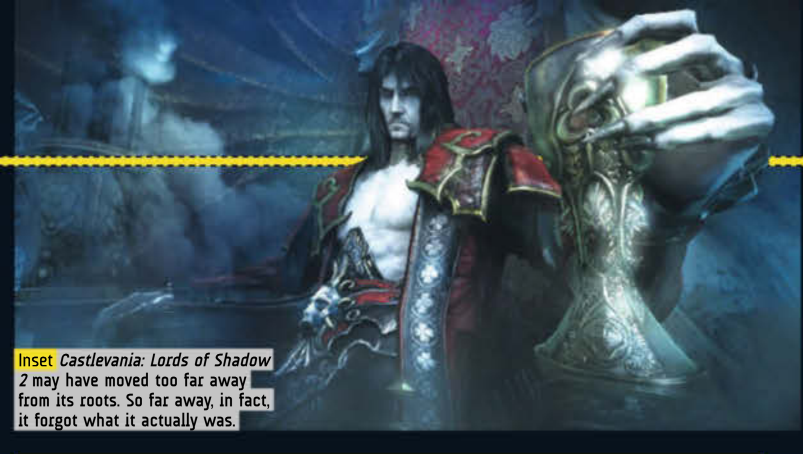
After seeing the middling scores the *Thief* reboot and *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2* achieved last month, we thought that maybe – just maybe – developers might be better off sticking to what they know. *Castlevania* attempted to introduce stealth elements that felt rushed and out of place, whereas *Thief* focused too much on elements outside of its core stealth remit. Had these games stayed within the confines of their 'roots', then they might have offered a more refined, focused experience, but where would that leave the respective franchises on their next instalments (which we'll inevitably see in the next few years)?



Below *Black Flag* retained a lot of its *Assassin's Creed* tropes, but it felt like something totally different.

LET'S TAKE ASSASSIN'S *Creed* as an example – the first game generated a huge amount of hype, and while it was a good open-world action-adventure, it was hemmed

PETER MOLYNEUX CALLS FABLE III A "TRAINWRECK"  DINO CRISIS SAID TO BE DUE A NEXT-GEN REBOOT


Inset *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2* may have moved too far away from its roots. So far away, in fact, it forgot what it actually was.

> "We want to do new things, but not move away from the previous games entirely"
> David Cox, Producer - Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2

in, suffocated by its obsession with languid cinematic cutaways. Its sequel – arguably the best of the entire series – moved on, dropping the ten-minute dialogues and focusing on the aspects of the game that actually worked: the exploration, the assassinations and the navigation. Now, six games later, people are calling for *Assassin's Creed* to 'go back to its roots' – apparently the lack of assassination missions and context in *Black Flag* rubbed some players up the wrong way. We *don't* want to see that – in fact, we want *Assassin's Creed* to carry on its merry way down the period-simulation route. We'd never played a legitimate pirate simulator before *Black Flag* – who's to say *Assassin's Creed V* isn't going to be an Amazonian explorer simulator? We won't tread this kind of new ground if we just go back to having a boring old assassin stalking the streets around some religious landmarks again.

This industry is in an odd position – the only comparable form we really have is the comic book. Like Marvel or DC, games publishers and developers rely on their popular characters and franchises to assure sales and we end up falling into the same traps because of that – look at the same regurgitated *X-Men* arcs that get pumped out, year-on-year, then look at *Call Of Duty*. The results are more than just cosmetically similar; repetition breeds stagnation, and if a developer insists on 'playing it safe' rather than risking an innovation or two, we're going to end up at *Battlefield 12* or *Titanfall 23* still trying to snipe pilots out of mechs or fire rockets into buildings, wasting the capabilities of our tech and letting the creativity that this industry is so good at inspiring go to waste.

It is a shame when a franchise known for its quality and creativity lazily spawns a spin-off or sequel that's uninspired and grey (we're looking at you, *Halo: Spartan Assault*), but isn't the odd attack on our nostalgia worth it if it means better games further down the line? Without the lessons learned in *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, we probably wouldn't see what we do in *Watch Dogs*. Without Obsidian's slightly misguided *Fallout: New Vegas*, we probably wouldn't have seen *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* do so well. Without three evolving, altering iterations of *Uncharted*, we probably wouldn't see the design expertise of *The Last Of Us* become so realised, so adeptly laser-focused. As an industry, we're firmly into our adolescence, and like all moody teens, we're becoming more and more outspoken as we find exactly what's going to push us into adulthood. In the meantime, we've got so many ideas flying around that it's hard to keep them all in – of course, some of them are going to be trite, but at least we don't rest on our laurels and pump out *exactly* the same drivel every year, just because we know it'll make millions. Isn't that right, Hollywood?


Inset *Lightning Returns* was a brave experiment in innovation by Square Enix, and the result was an RPG unlike anything we've seen before.

EVOLUTION OF A SERIES

For every game that has been weakened by a developer's insistence on keeping it alive, there's another franchise that has benefitted from a reboot



GRAND THEFT AUTO

■ Starting out as a top-down shoot-'em-up held together by a predictable plot and, well, guns, *GTA* has evolved to become the darling of the games industry; the ultimate anarchist's playground. While that has never really changed, what we have seen is the evolution of how *GTA* plays with narrative: not only does it set up a world where you can do what you like, it also empowers you within it. *GTA III* brought a framework that broke ground and *GTA V* mastered it. We want to keep seeing this game move up – going back to its roots would be a travesty.



MARIO

■ The iconic Italian plumber had humble beginnings; a 2D side-scrolling platformer, *Mario Bros* introduced the world to Mario in his first proper game. Since then, we've seen him take to the kart, go to the Olympics, get involved in brawls and even enter a football tournament. When Nintendo finally decided to bring Mario into the 3D world, the developer proved Mario was more than just a two-dimensional character – Nintendo kept him relevant, something he wouldn't be if he was still confined to haggard 2D worlds.



DEVIL MAY CRY

■ 2012's *DmC* split opinion, but it proved there was still life in Dante beyond throwing him into a game where he was actually a supporting role (*Devil May Cry 4*). The first *Devil May Cry* was thrown together from the remnants of a *Resident Evil 4* tech demo and sported claustrophobic and fairly lifeless environments that became a staple for the series. Ninja Theory's reboot gave Dante the kick up the arse he sorely needed, injecting colour, coolness and crunchiness into the series.



TOMB RAIDER

■ With writer Rhianna Pratchett behind Square Enix's recent reboot, Lara took on a life of her own (beyond the infamous 'assets' she was known for). *Tomb Raider* (2013) is a game that moves distinctly away from the 'roots' of the series – something that the almost infinite iterations of the title beforehand had been reluctant to do. The result was an engaging and emotional game that looked as good as it played – Lara became more than an emotionless spelunker; she became a survivalist.

FAR CRY 4 RUMOURED TO BE SET IN THE HIMALAYAS → LAST OF US SEQUEL IS 50/50 SAY NAUGHTY DOG





(INFINITY WARD INTERVIEW)

Call Of Duty's sporting chance

While we were at The Call Of Duty European Championship we spotted Joseph Cecot, multiplayer designer at Infinity Ward. We asked him how important eSports was to the success and design of the Call Of Duty series

Do you come to a lot of these kinds of events? What do you get out of them?
I've started to, yeah. Part of it is pleasure. Part of it is that it's awesome to see the game being played at this level. The pros are exceptional. But also it's really cool to see the features that we've put in for eSports and for the game in general – just to see them used in something like this, something that's as high profile as this.

Some games are staples of eSports for a long, long time, such as *Halo 3* and *Quake 3*. Is the need to stay on top different for *Call Of Duty* because it supersedes itself on an annual basis?
We're always watching what's happening in the market and there are multiple factors that lead us to change the game to keep it fresh. We do release yearly and we understand that and that's why there is a strive internally with each studio that works on *Call Of Duty* to bring that freshness and to change it up. Part of it is freshness and the other part is constantly wanting to improve. Even though we know we have a quality product and we know our fans love it, at the end of the day we are always competing with ourselves.

Do you get a different level of feedback from professional gamers?
Pro players are very different from our more casual or standard player audience. Both are very passionate, but both want different things out of the game. The pro players want as fair a playing field as possible, so we work very closely with them to exclude certain portions of the game and modify parts of the game for them. I don't get as much feedback at these shows as we do internally when we have them on-site.





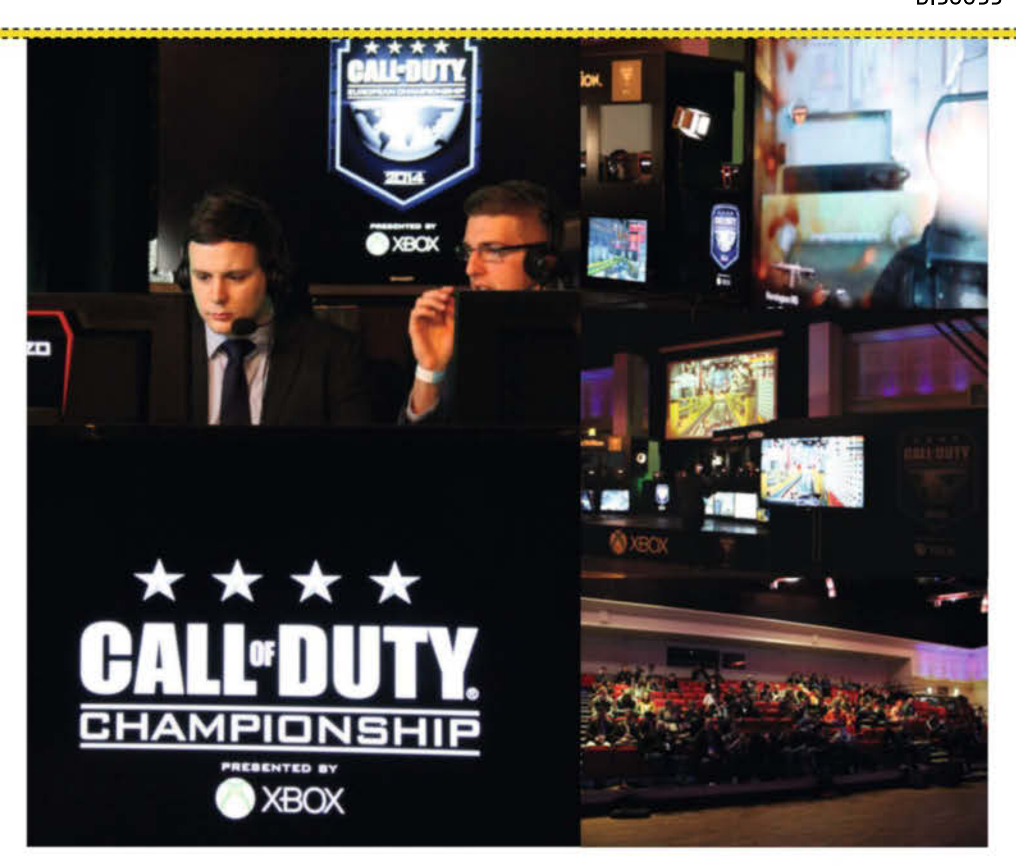
How does feedback affect game development? Is it something that starts early on or after it comes out?
With *Call Of Duty: Ghosts,* a lot of it was post-ship. We got the game out on multiple consoles with a nice, stable, balanced game and toward the end of development we brought in the pro players to see what they wanted. We brought in podcasters to let them play, and the game has evolved since then and we've been very diligent at keeping that feedback loop going since the game's release.

Can you give specific examples where pro players have affected any changes?
Little things like where we've been trying to condense screen space to give more space to the game, which is where we have the Obituary, which is the kill feed behind the personal menu. It shows what players are playing, but in eSports it made it hard to watch because you couldn't see who was taking

Below Siege and Octane were the most popular maps at the Championships.



 HIDEO KOJIMA AWARDS BAFTA FELLOWSHIP TO ROCKSTAR  STAR CITIZEN BREAKS $40M IN CROWDFUNDING



out who. Then we added other things like the new Oracle Mode, which allows podcasters to watch an outline of the players at all times, which really helps viewing and that's something that helps a lot. It's about thinking about how the game can be watched in a better way.

PC gaming has traditionally dominated eSports over the last few decades. Do you see things changing toward consoles in the future?

Me personally, I watched Thresh and some of those guys playing *Quake* all the way up to *Quake III*. I was a huge *Quake* fan, but more recently with the *Halos* and everything, consoles have become really mainstream and they're here to stay. The new consoles have launched and have had a great reception, so I think that eSports is going to continue being very powerful on console, but you'll still have your *League Of Legends* and other games where a mouse and keyboard are the optimal input for a game.

Are consoles becoming more of a level playing field for the people taking part in eSports?

I don't know if it's any more level than for PC. On PC you just have a different input device. I think consoles have a lower barrier to entry and I think that's one of the reasons why you've seen that movement [of eSports from PC to console].

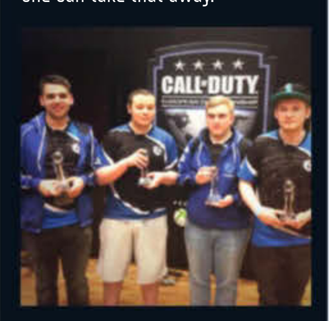
Above Plenty of portions of chips were consumed, but other than that the display of eSportsmanship was impressive.

Below *Call Of Duty: Ghosts* retains a strong eSports following.

Ghost with the most

All hail TCM Gaming, the best *Call Of Duty* players in Europe

OVER TWO FULL days of live competition held at Twickenham Stadium in West London, 26 professional *Call Of Duty* teams from across Europe battled it out for places in the World Championship and the chance to win $1m (£600k) in prize money. We witnessed a number of close scraps, not least the Russian and Benelux Qualifiers, but in the end it was UK team TCM Gaming that reigned supreme, going forward as the *Call Of Duty* European Champions 2014. Whatever happens at the World Championship in Los Angeles, no one can take that away.

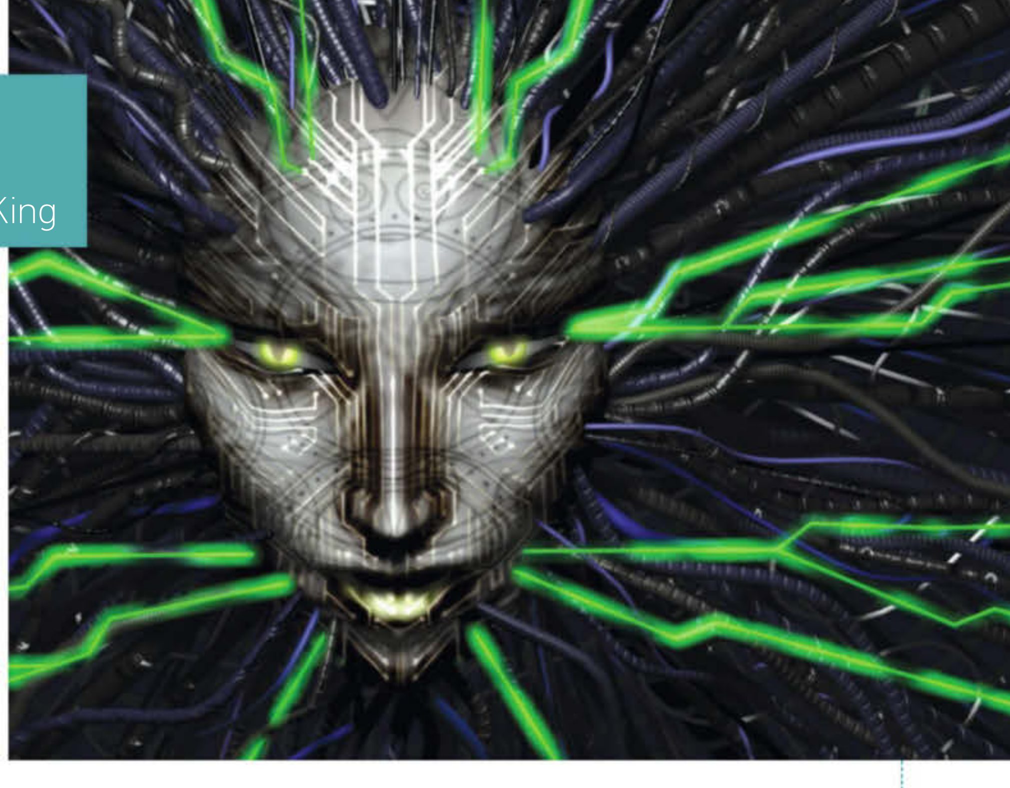




> Pro players are very different from our more casual player audience. Both are very passionate, but both want different things out of the game
>
> Joseph Cecot, designer at Infinity Ward

RASPBERRY PI SALES REACH 2.5M → 3D REALMS BOUGHT BY DUKE NUKEM: MASS DESTRUCTION DEVELOPER

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



The Irrational Story No-One Is Talking About



The danger of writing these columns based on current events is that by the time you read them, they're inevitably out of date. This isn't some previously unknown Achilles heel of magazine publishing but it is why I won't talk about the riots in Ukraine, the floods in Somerset or Team GB winning bronze in women's curling. Lucky you, really.

This column highlights that. As you read this, the story that Ken Levine is closing Irrational Games will be fading from view as the shock subsides (no pun intended). 2K Games will crank up the speed on the hype machine as another project dominates column inches and the why-did-Ken-close-down-Irrational question will only flare up again when Ken himself steps forward to answer them, which will only happen on his terms and when the mood takes him.

But the real reason for writing this is that the most interesting story in this fiasco has been missed. It's not about Ken Levine's ego, what he'll do next or what will happen with *BioShock*. It's about the apparent failure of *BioShock Infinite*.

BioShock Infinite scored 10/10 in this very magazine and while some would argue it doesn't deserve that score, **games™** wasn't alone in awarding it top marks. It is a game of significant merit, even if that merit is open for debate. More importantly, at least as far as shareholders and bean-counters are concerned, *BioShock Infinite* sold four million copies. It had quality *and* sales on its side.

But was that enough? The answer seems to be no. Perhaps more depressing is that it won't really be a surprise to anyone who has followed its development closely. Work on *BioShock Infinite* began in February 2008. It hit the shelves over five years later, after top talent had left the studio, a multiplayer element was considered and scrapped, scenes from promotional material such as Elizabeth resurrecting a fallen horse vanished into the ether and the game itself was significantly delayed. And *BioShock Vita*? The less said about that, the better.

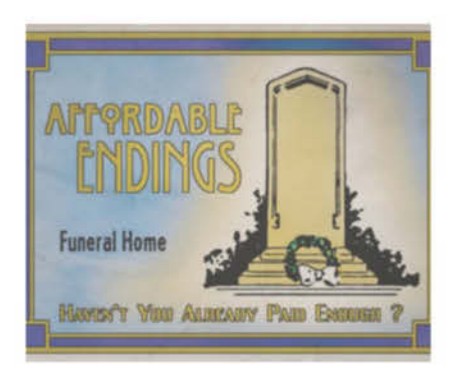
Yet despite its clearly troubled development, it does make you wonder – if a game like *BioShock Infinite* isn't immune to the financial chokehold that seems to be squeezing the life out of the triple-A games scene, then what games *are* immune? *Grand Theft Auto*, *FIFA*, *Call Of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* obviously belong in that elite tier of games that seem to sell well regardless of quality or content.

But other games have struggled and failed to join that list, missing the key element that keeps their franchise necessary in the eyes of the consumers. *Tomb Raider* missed its sales targets. *Final Fantasy*'s influence has waned. *Resident Evil* has lost its way. And now Irrational Games has closed its doors. (And as a side-note, it'll be interesting to see how *Watch Dogs* does).

> No publisher closes a successful studio at the whim of its creative director, co-founder or anyone else

There will be an argument that *BioShock Infinite was* financially successful but no publisher closes a successful studio at the whim of its creative director, co-founder or anyone else. There's obviously something else going on beneath the surface and it's likely we won't really know what happened at Irrational Games until time dulls the pain of the employees and the interest of 2K's legal hounds, just as we'll never know what was said in the Microsoft war-room following the disastrous Xbox One reveal or what happened the day West and Zampella were marched off Infinity Ward's premises.

But the real message to take away from this is that it's another blow to the unsustainable model of throwing millions of dollars at triple-A games seeking *Call Of Duty* levels of success. Can this new generation of consoles survive without those sorts of games? If not, what alternatives are there? Is this why Sony has thrown its weight behind the indie revolution? This generation is going to be very, very interesting to follow.



■ The signs were there for all to see, it seems.

Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com

ROOM WITH A VIEW

With The Chinese Room's Dan Pinchbeck



Stories, games and the power of Joel's otter



Okay, before we start: in my last column I moaned about *Assassin's Creed* and its endless tutorials. Then played *Black Flag*. Optional tutorials! The karma gods smiled and I take it all back. Now if I just gripe about *Half-Life 3* not coming out, it should be with us by summer, right?

To business. I'm writing this in Perth, where it's bloody hot, and the Perth Writers Festival is on and, in an international first, they've got a bunch of game writers together to stand in equal footing with novelists and non-fiction authors of considerable prestige. This is A Very Good Thing. For a long time games have always been the slightly unpalatable thing that high culture couldn't ignore because it's an industry that generates a vast amount of money, employment and happiness, but it feels here like there's a genuine interest in the idea that games can also be a sophisticated storytelling form that deserve equal appreciation. Also A Very Good Thing.

> A quick scan down the best games of the last year or so throws up great story after great story

Not all games need stories, sure. Lots more don't need anything other than a functional bit of "stand here and shoot that because they killed your [insert relative here]". But if there's one thing that's been proved in the last couple of years it's that gamers also want good stories. Of course, we always did – but this time around it just feels somehow different, less niche or sporadic, taken as seriously as physics collision, artificial intelligence and finely-honed mechanics.

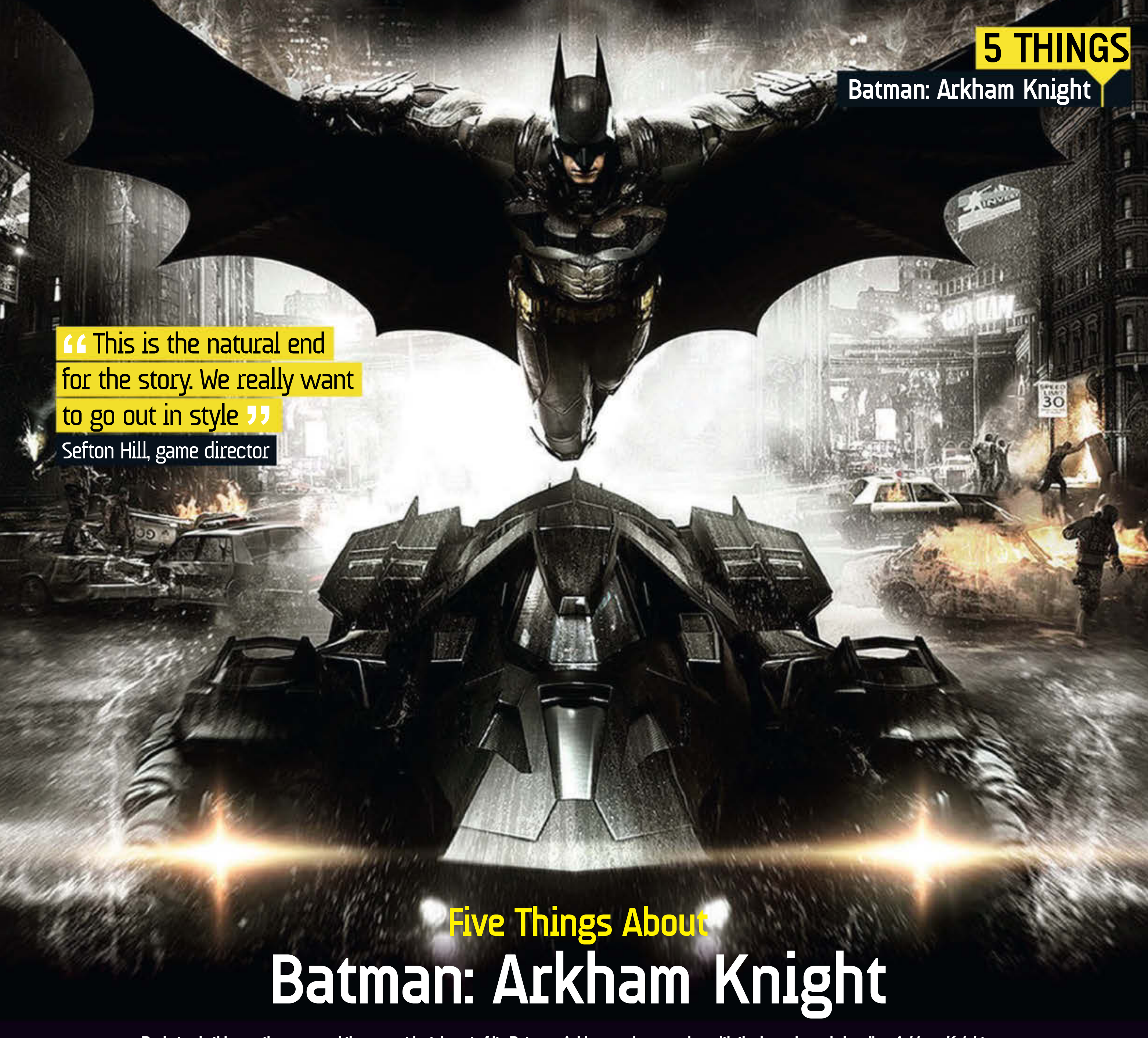


■ Joel is hiding something within that beard of his, but whether it's an otter remains to be seen.

What's equally exciting are the kinds of stories we're seeing. Yeah, we've still got a long way to go in terms of sophistication in lots of areas. The technical issues with emergent storytelling, for example, are pretty tough; they are more or less the same problems facing hardcore AI, so we maybe shouldn't expect too much too quickly. But a quick scan down the best games of the last year or so throws up great story after great story. And both diversity and weirdness are happening, and weirdness is always a good sign of a healthy medium. A few years ago, when *Cryostasis*, which still features probably the craziest end of an FPS ever, came out, it was an oddball minor title. For all its faults, *BioShock Infinite* dragged us through a grand temple of barking mad in its final chapters, and that was amazing to see come out of a big triple-A franchise.

So while I'm kind of hoping the sequel to *The Last of Us* will reveal that Joel's beard is actually a pan-dimensional otter, I'm also happy to just play an increasing number of stories that don't feel like they were created by a marketing committee. It's not just about lone developers being successful, it's about a wider understanding that powerful vision, unique voices and playing with fullest range of worlds and stories our imaginations can come up with can only be a good thing. It's what we've always done in nearly every other aspect of game development. It's great to see story getting its chance to shine.

Dan Pinchbeck is the creative director at The Chinese Room, currently working on Everybody's Gone To The Rapture. His views aren't necessarily representative of **games™**.



> "This is the natural end for the story. We really want to go out in style"
> Sefton Hill, game director

Five Things About
Batman: Arkham Knight

Rockstеady this month announced the newest instalment of its Batman: Arkham series – coming with the imposing sub-heading *Arkham Knight*. Set to release on 14 October, *Arkham Knight* will see a launch on the PS4, Xbox One and PC. Taking place one year after the events of *Arkham City*, the next-gen only game will focus on a Batman who's at the peak of his powers…

1 It's back in the hands of Rocksteady…
Whilst we did enjoy Warner Bros. Montreal's take on the Dark Knight's origins, the whole experience felt like a muted tribute to the watertight legacy Rocksteady set up with its previous two instalments. Now its back in the care of Rocksteady, between the prodigal developer returning and the power of the Xbox One and PS4's tech, this has the potential to be a truly definitive superhero game.

2 The Batmobile features heavily…
According to Rocksteady, the power of next-gen technology has allowed the developer to not only include the Batmobile, but also make it a core element of the gameplay. This means Rocksteady has had to widen the roads of Arkham/Gotham city to allow the Batmobile room to manoeuvre – could this be Batman's answer to *Grand Theft Auto*…?

3 Scarecrow is the main villain…
Scarecrow is set to take over the Joker's throne as the king of villainy in *Arkham Knight* – he's threatening to pump the entire city full of his psychoactive fear gas. To make matters more complicated, Two-Face, Penguin and Harley Quinn have formed a deadly alliance – putting their heads together to find a way to take out Bats once and for all. We're hoping to see more nightmare sequences.

4 It's been in development for ages…
Arkham Origins may not have been the gritty look into Bruce Wayne's past that many were hyped for, but even if you didn't like the game, it did serve a practical purpose – Warner Bros. Montreal's temporary tenure on the series has allowed Rocksteady a longer development cycle in getting *Arkham Knight* prepped: this game will be *polished*.

5 It's going to be the final game in the *Arkham* series…
Rocksteady has stated that this will be the final chapter for this universe's Batman; "this is the natural end for the story," the developer said in a statement. "We really want to go out in style." Retail listings of the game claim it to have an "explosive finale" – something we're quite certain is going to be taken literally. (Does that conjure up images of *The Dark Knight Rises* 'explosive' finale for anyone else?)



The Irrational Closure

Earlier this month Ken Levine posted an entry on the Irrational Games blog, announcing the closure of the studio. The visionary designer/director wanted to move back a smaller team working on games for the core gamer. His actions cost a lot of Irrational staff their jobs, though – Levine opted to take only 15 staff with him – so we asked you: was it selfish of Levine to disband Irrational?

On the surface it seems selfish, but as is usually the case with this industry you can't really take anything at face value. I think the only people who can have a valid opinion on this matter are the people directly involved.
Andy O'Flaherty, Facebook

While refocusing might be good for the few, it is not good for the entire team. They should have found a way to keep the talent.
@jmdelrio, Twitter

I wasn't there, I don't have all the facts, and have no idea what the full motivations for the decision were. Nothing to think.
@El_pinata, Twitter

Not a black and white situation. I praise Levine for going out of his way to follow his heart and pursue new games that don't fall under the triple-A label that Irrational's all about, but I hope that it was not a decision that caught everyone at the studio off-guard.
@ThyDarkAngel, Twitter

Ken Levine did not create any of the games he worked on single handed and it is an insult to everyone at Irrational Games that he sees fit to close the studio as he sees fit.
Thomas Marshall, Facebook

Feel sorry for those losing their jobs, don't agree with those attacking Levine – long dev times do not always benefit the game.
@merman1974, Twitter

There is no 'selfish' when it comes to making a decision about something that is your creation. Business is business, and if Levine no longer wishes for Irrational Games to continue as it has then it's his right as the founder and owner. As a gamer, it's always a shock to hear that a studio is closing its doors, but at least this time it's being done through choice rather than being enforced by faceless corporate greed of the publisher or backer – EA, Activision and the like should take note.
Mark Reid, Facebook

In my opinion it is better than overexposing the *BioShock* franchise. If he is emotionally done with it, he's no other choice.
@SebastianEssner, Twitter



BEYOND ELDER SCROLLS

THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE LEADS OUR HUGE GUIDE TO **THE FUTURE OF RPGS**, AS WE TAKE A LOOK AT HOW THE GENRE WILL CHANGE IN THE YEAR TO COME



Now more than ever, developers have to prove their worth. After the arrival of the latest console hardware, consumers are anxiously waiting for truly progressive experiences that fully utilise the latent capabilities inherent to a new era in gaming. And if there's one genre that has proven across multiple generations to be a showcase for unfettered ambition, depth and sheer epicness then it's the role-playing game.

In recent years we've seen the humble RPG evolve from stagnation, where arbitrary numbers trickle down the screen (plus, hardly any dragons) into one of the most exhilarating forms of entertainment around (with lots of big dragons). It's where whole fertile worlds are created from nothing, presented with their own unique characters and landmarks to be explored and consumed, stuffed with narrative and incidental story quirks that would dwarf most other works of fiction. You can spend a hundred hours invested in an RPG, and countless more in one you become enamoured with.

It makes sense then that **games™** is taking a closer look at the biggest titles in the genre due for release over the next year (and a bit), each a sterling example of a developer adapting the genre in imaginative and progressive way. As we dive into a deluge of extravagant new worlds, we're sure you'll agree: the possibilities really are endless. »





The Elder Scrolls Online

CONCEPT ■ Trademark *Elder Scrolls* questing around the outside, with a deliciously chewy online centre, filled with crunchy PVP bits

The war for Tamriel is about to begin

The public beta test is a curious phase in a game's life cycle. Often it's not much of a test at all, except perhaps to stretch the legs of the servers and the patience of the baying crowds that are eager to see the game get started. Beyond tweaking the odd stat or loot drop formula, it's usually far too late in the day to change anything fundamental.

The problem for *The Elder Scrolls Online* is that there have been concerns and doubts aplenty and, despite the application of some PR Deep Heat, those issues have remained fixed in many minds since the day the game was announced: why online; why take a supremely established solo experience where players can enjoy a game at their own pace and turn it into a team sport, where the presence of others often turns the questing process into a race to hit the experience point ceiling? It's a fair question and one Bethesda has done a relatively poor job of addressing. Work on *Elder Scrolls Online*, we must remember, started back in 2007, when *World Of Warcraft* was so far ahead of everything else in terms of player numbers that MMORPGs and subscription gaming was a seemingly unstoppable bandwagon that everyone was »

INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, Mac, PS4, Xbox One
Origin:
US
Publisher:
Bethesda
Developer:
ZeniMax Online Studios
Release:
6 April
Genre:
MMORPG
Players:
MMO

Developer Profile

ZeniMax Online Studios has a very close relationship with the main *Elder Scrolls* team and was able to call upon a vast library of lore when designing *Elder Scrolls Online*, which was evident throughout our jaunt across Tamriel.

Developer History

The Elder Scrolls Online
2014
(PC, Mac, Xbox One, PS4)

High Point

It's been a difficult road for ZeniMax, having had to watch the demise of the traditional MMO, but with the recent beta test and as players have gained access to *TESO*'s PVP region, interest has been resurgent and the doubts over other parts of the game have receded.

clamouring to get on board. Given the critical and commercial success of *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*, it seemed a natural progression for Bethesda to take the series into the MMO realm.

Now, six years on, almost every MMORPG that has launched since *Warcraft* has failed to gain a significant audience and of those that are still standing, they remain viable only because of drastic revisions to revenue generation and the scaling back of development efforts. Even Blizzard is recognising that World Of Warcraft is approaching its sunshine years, which means to everyone else the MMORPG as a persistent and ever-evolving world of developer-rich content is effectively over. Five years ago we'd be proclaiming it as a '*WOW* killer'. In 2014, it's more likely that any new online fantasy role-player will trip and fall on its own sword.

But this is *The Elder Scrolls* we're talking about, a series that is some 20 years old – older than many of its fans. As a staunch and consistent servant to RPG sensibilities it predates and outnumbers anything with *Warcraft* in the title and it's safe to say that no other RPG series straddles the gulf between old school veneration and modern era innovation with quite the same ease. More importantly for the likely nervous publisher, the popularity of each *Elder Scrolls* only seems to grow with each new release. *Oblivion* was a huge success, selling an estimated five million copies, while 20 million people purchased *Skyrim*. Obviously it's hard to see *Elder Scrolls Online* continuing that sales trajectory, but if just 5% of *Skyrim* fans stick around past the first month you can be sure that Bethesda will be quietly ecstatic. With millions of MMO fans without a home and with few games for them to look forward to, there's an argument to suggest that the relative scarcity of new online RPGs might work in the game's favour, for as old fashioned as *The Elder Scrolls* may appear, there is much that challenges MMO convention.

/// While earlier version of the 3D engine favoured a more cel-shaded look, the developer went back to the drawing board and set out to deliver a game closer to the fidelity of *Skyrim*. It's not quite as detailed, nor its animations as distinct, but the landscape and the characters that roam it are immediately familiar, and of course there are a lot more of both to enjoy.

The Elder Scrolls Online is the first game in the series to set itself across the entirety of Tamriel since the very first title, *Arena*, launched the series back in 1994. As you might expect the two games are very different in how they portray such a vast landscape. The creators of Arena had to rely on procedural generation and ended up with a map that offered millions of square miles to explore. Even the considerably smaller *Daggerfall*, with its 88,745 square miles, took two weeks of in-game trudgery to walk from end to end. Given that the developers of *The Elder Scrolls Online* would like player's paths to

"We don't want the player to worry about which parts of the game to pay for – with our system, they get it all"
MATT FIROR, ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS



The combat, cribbed from previous *Elder Scrolls* games is largely a triumph and a revelation when compared to the rusty old systems we've gotten used to since *World Of Warcraft*.

FACTION WARFARE

The three-way war for the heart of Tamriel



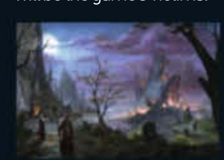
Ebonheart Pact

As well as holding the largest area around Tamriel's north and eastern shores, it's likely that the Ebonheart Pact will be the most popular alliance in the game, containing as it does the regions of Skyrim, Morrowind and Black Marsh. We expect to see quite a few Nords and Dark Elves vying for the Ruby Throne.



Aldmeri Dominion

Across Tamriel's balmy south east are the lands of Summerset Isle, Valenwood and Elsweyr, the respective homes of the High Elves, Wood Elves and Khajiit that have come together under the yellow banner. On the basis of this rather underpowered set, we predict the Dominion will be the game's victims.



Daggerfall Covenant

The dark horses in *TESO*'s triumvirate of warring factions is the Covenant, made up of Bretons from High Rock, Redguards from Hammerfell and Orcs from Orsinium. The word on the street is that the Daggerfall Covenant will be the favoured alliance of more elite-minded players, on account of the smaller regions and thus potentially faster levelling.





RIGHT: Given that many of *TESO*'s developers cut their MMO teeth on *Dark Age Of Camelot*, perhaps we shouldn't be so surprised by comparisons to the old Mythic MMO.
BELOW: *TESO* requires a monthly subscription, likely remaining divisive, but if the developer can keep content coming, there's no reason for players not to be won over.

What promises to be the game's greatest triumph is the PVP region of Cyrodiil, with its own set of quests and characters and the over-arching narrative of war.



cross from time to time, the scale of the world will be closer to that of *Morrowind*, *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, with an estimated 412 square miles of playable space across the nine regions, which is still 30 times the area of Skyrim. By way of comparison, *World Of Warcraft*'s was reckoned to offer around 60 square miles of navigable terrain when it first launched. Bethesda will be heartened to know that in at least one aspect *The Elder Scrolls Online* will be much bigger.

While the regions recognisable from previous games have an obvious allure, it's the lands of Cyrodiil that are perhaps the most interesting in the game, for as well as being at the geographic heart of Tamriel (and the setting for *Oblivion*), it is where the game's realm vs realm Alliance War takes place and an area, it is hoped, the vast majority of subscribers will call home. Across the region are sited a number of keeps and various other supporting settlements, the capture of which will add to your faction's stock of Alliance Points. Walls and gatehouses can be destroyed by siege engines to hasten conquest, the cost to such destruction being that once you capture a keep you're going to have to spend more resources to get it back to a defensible state if you've just flattened it. Thankfully by capturing villages, mines and mills, the defensive infrastructure around each keep should be easier and cheaper to maintain.

There are 18 keeps in total, six in each faction territory, linked by transit lines that the holders can fast move between. The more keeps your side controls, the closer your side is to claiming the Ruby Throne. When it does, the player with the most Alliance Points is crowned Emperor. With hundreds of characters charging across plains, arrows flying and siege machines rumbling around, *TESO*'s Alliance War is not only spectacular, it is epic in every sense of the word, reminiscent of the much-loved realm vs realm battles that set *Dark Age Of Camelot* apart from the likes of *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online* back in the day, and with seemingly much more to offer than the more modern castle battles of *Guild Wars 2*.

It's not just large-scale warfare that impresses. Much more than the setting for vast pitched battles between the game's three factions, Cyrodiil is its own PvP server. The region has its own towns, economy and NPCs so there's plenty of solo and group content that players can immerse themselves in without directly getting involved in the war waging around them. There are daily quests too, some of which will require you to track down other players and assassinate them, meaning that you can help the war effort by going behind enemy lines rather than aggressively approaching the war head on. While we didn't manage to spend much time exploring all of what Cyrodiil has to offer, it's clear to us that Bethesda and ZeniMax have put a lot of thought into creating a region that doesn't just cater to the elite end-game »

crowd, but has a little of something for everyone. Even crafters will have good reason to pass through the region.

/// In order to access *The Elder Scrolls Online*'s PVP you're going to have to level up your character to level 10, a process that can often make or break an MMO. While we have a few issues of dissonance between the largely solo-focused questing and the immersion-breaking presence of other players to the story, we have to recognise that the developer has made a concerted effort to ensure the clutter that most MMO players endure is kept to a minimum. The various actions and quickslots that are often mapped to various hotbars that many MMO gamers have across every edge of the screen is reduced to a mere few, which when not in use – not in combat in other words – slides out of view to leave a clean and clutter-free interface.

Truth be told, the screen is no busier than *Oblivion* or *Skyrim* and in some ways is better than both, which bodes well for the next-gen console release. While not switched on for the beta, it wasn't difficult to get the game working well with a 360 controller, which doesn't at all suggest the game has been dumbed down, only that the number of quick slot abilities has been reduced to a workable minimum. Though some PC purists will think otherwise, the streamlining works to the good of combat generally, and in fact we'd argue that *TESO* offers perhaps the most enjoyable and fluid melee mechanics we've seen in any MMO, period.

Combat has been one of the most evolved systems of the more recent *Elder Scrolls* games and it remains the case in *The Elder Scrolls Online*, with melee attacks and blocks mapped to the mouse buttons, which will almost certainly transfer to the trigger or shoulder buttons in the next-gen console versions. Similar to *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, success in combat requires you to watch and respond to enemy cues, rather than the more traditional and tiresome MMO methods of spamming timed actions. In addition there is a 'finesse' system judging your actions and timing behind the scenes, so that the more effective you become with your light or heavy attacks, blocks and evading moves, the more the game will reward you with experience.

It's a unique system, one that not only looks to promote skilful real-time combat, but should dissuade players from relying on the dubious benefits of using macros to do their levelling for them. Unfortunately, ranged attacks aren't nearly as nuanced or satisfying. There's no leading of targets or any benefit to targeting body parts, meaning those who like to take on the role of ranger will feel a little underwhelmed next to those who like to swing an axe above their head.

WARCRAFT FIGHTS BACK

Why Warlords Of Draenor could see the hordes return

World Of Warcraft will be hitting its tenth year this November, a milestone it will be celebrating with the release of the game's fifth expansion, *Warlords Of Draenor*. With numbers down to 7.8m from a peak of 12m in 2010, the add-on is being seen by many as an attempt to rejuvenate the game. With a much needed renovation to character models and a raising of the level cap to 100, there is plenty to get excited about, with all the usual new raids, quests dungeons and bosses. Top of the list of features however is a new continent, the eponymous Draenor and a new Garrison feature that allows players to erect buildings and recruit NPC followers. The feature seems to have been inspired by the *Warcraft* strategy games of old, perhaps with a more casual *Dwarf Fortress* twist. Without doubt it's a fascinating and unique addition to the game that we're eager to play around with. If *World Of Warcraft* is indeed entering its frail dotage, there's more than a little life left.



■ The likely reason Bethesda is sticking with a subscriber model is that it can switch to a free-to-play model later on. Starting with free-to-play gives you nowhere else to go.

■ Having played the beta, the *Oblivion/Skyrim*-style of combat seems such a natural fit for an online game that one wonders why so few have borrowed the system before. ■ The online gaming landscape has changed massively since work on *TESO* began, to the point that the game almost seems to represent the end of an era with barely any traditional MMOs following it.



"It's going to be perceived as a good RPG and a good Elder Scrolls game that you get to play with your buddies more than a good MMO"

BRIAN WHEELER, ZENIMAX ONLINE STUDIOS

As to the progression from the game's tutorial area of Coldharbour, it's fair to say that the game takes a while before it cuts you free to do your own thing. A succession of starter zones do little else but hem you in to storyline quests that feel more like filler material than the main game proper, but once you reach your faction's capital city, around five or six hours in, the game opens up and feels much closer to its single player predecessors. It's not nearly as expansive or as interactive as you might be used to in *Skyrim*; you can't pick up nearly as much tat and the mainline quest-givers are made a little too obvious, but there exist a number of characters that will open up to reveal dungeon quests that in most online RPGs are overtly signposted with over-sized exclamation marks floating over NPC heads.

///Though we haven't progressed very far into the main questlines of the game, judged purely as a single-player experience it's hard to see how *The Elder Scrolls Online* will match the quality of *Skyrim*'s campaign, by way of your player not enjoying the full focus of everything going on around them. On the other hand, with so much *Elder Scrolls* real estate to explore, one might more easily be able to overlook the unavoidable lack of narrative focus. But of course the point is that *The Elder Scrolls Online* isn't single-player and we can happily report that in the process of letting the masses through the door, on the evidence we've seen so far, the game does a lot more right than it does wrong. While the game doesn't seem quite as open for exploration as it's solo-centric predecessors, there's much more of the game that is left for players to stumble upon than in most MMOs we've played.

Of course, those secrets won't stay secret for long, but this being *Elder Scrolls* there is an innate feeling of mystery and intrigue, and it feels much more natural to make your own way at your own pace rather than rip through the levels before the first month is up and the subscription kicks in. Looking ahead to the console release we have to admit that after some initial scepticism we're largely won over by the promise the desktop edition offers.

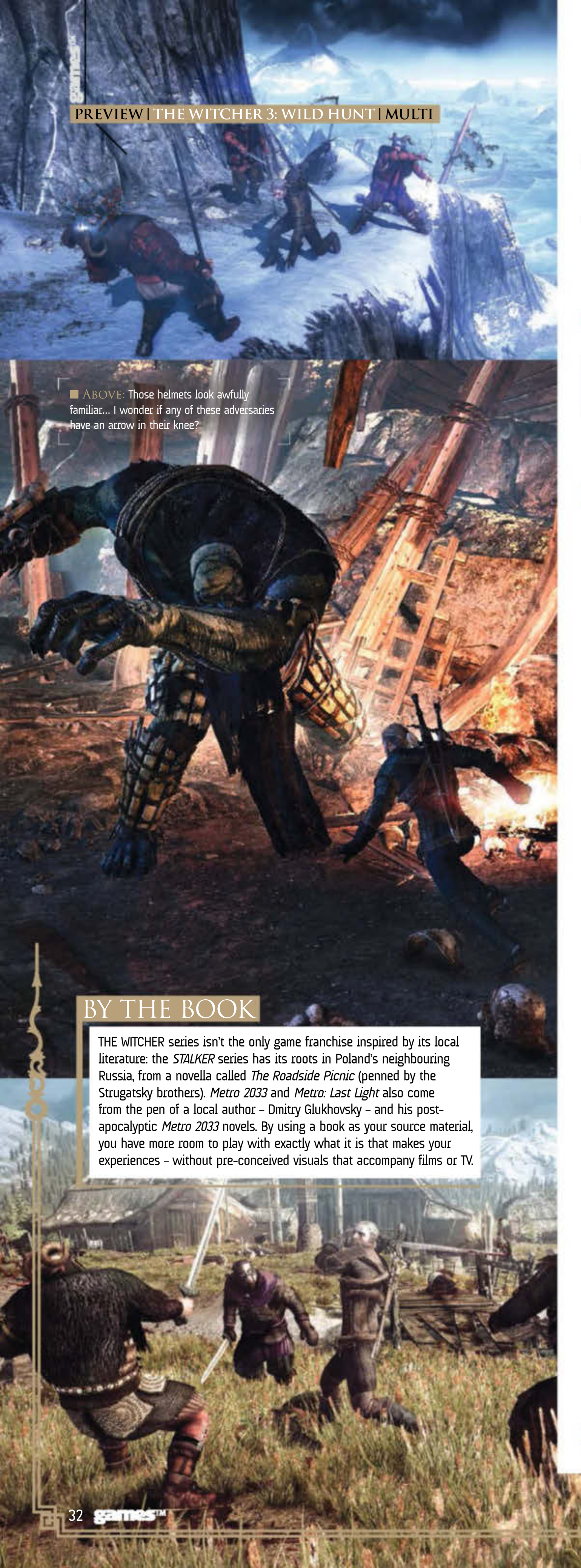
The control system will work, of that we have no doubt, and the graphical heft of the Xbox One and PS4 mean there should be few issues rendering the extensive landscapes or the hundreds of characters than can potentially fill the screen. *The Elder Scrolls Online* actually runs better on our older PCs than *Skyrim*, which is either a concern or benefit depending on your point of view. The two potential issues, for all versions of the game, will most likely come down to latency and cost, one impossible to gauge during a beta and other difficult to make a judgment on without exhausting all the content the game offers before Bethesda is able to keep up with demand. Given the network needs of the game's real time combat, especially in large-scale PVP, quality of service is key, which a monthly fee should secure.

But in this day and age, are gamers as willing to subscribe to a game as they once were? Who can say. But if Bethesda do manage to convert millions of console gamers into MMO subscribers, it would be an achievement as impressive as *World Of Warcraft*'s success. Maybe it's not too late for that fabled *WOW* killer after all.

Size Matters

The first two *Elder Scrolls* offered absurdly vast playing areas, too big to have been designed by hand and therefore almost meaningless to explore. *The Elder Scrolls Online* is big, but not that big

- The Elder Scrolls I: Arena 3,728,227 SQM
- The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall 88,745 SQM
- The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind 10 SQM
- The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion 16 SQM
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim 14 SQM
- The Elder Scrolls Online 412 SQM



■ ABOVE: Those helmets look awfully familiar… I wonder if any of these adversaries have an arrow in their knee?

BY THE BOOK

THE WITCHER series isn't the only game franchise inspired by its local literature: the *STALKER* series has its roots in Poland's neighbouring Russia, from a novella called *The Roadside Picnic* (penned by the Strugatsky brothers). *Metro 2033* and *Metro: Last Light* also come from the pen of a local author – Dmitry Glukhovsky – and his post-apocalyptic *Metro 2033* novels. By using a book as your source material, you have more room to play with exactly what it is that makes your experiences – without pre-conceived visuals that accompany films or TV.

THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT

CONCEPT ■ *The Witcher 3* continues the story of Geralt of Rivia – based on the fantasy books by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski

FOR EVERY ACTION, THERE IS AN EQUAL AND OPPOSITE REACTION

INFORMATION

DETAILS

Format: PC, PS4, Xbox One
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
Developer: CD Projekt RED
Release: Feb 2015
Genre: Action RPG
Players: 1

DEVELOPER PROFILE

CD Projekt RED is a developer responsible for Poland's finest games – showing its capability with the earlier instalments of the *Witcher* series, RED have since announced *Cyberpunk 2077*: a title based on the popular board game of the same name. CD Projekt RED uses its own in-house engine.

DEVELOPER HISTORY

The Witcher
2007 [PC]
The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings
2011 [Mac, PC, 360]

HIGH POINT

The Witcher 2 demonstrated all the finest parts of a game developed for PC – deep, complex combat, finely detailed graphics and an intuitive, thoughtful UI. Plus, it all translated well to console.

In the run-up to its release, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* is whipping up a storm. It has the potential to take the Xbox One and PS4's hardware to their respective limits, using CD Projekt RED's internal REDengine 3 to render environments and characters that will supposedly do justice to the finely-tuned worlds initially laid out by Andrzej Sapkowski. We had the fantastic opportunity to talk to Michał Krzemiński – senior art producer at the studio – about how his game hits upon all the core mechanics that gamers like us have come to expect from an RPG, and what the game can achieve with the new powers made available with next-gen tech.

YOU'VE PREVIOUSLY STATED THAT THE GAME WILL FEATURE '36 DIFFERENT ENDINGS, 12 WORLD STATES AND 3 FULLY PLAYABLE EPILOGUES' – CAN YOU TELL US HOW THE GAME WILL ACCOMMODATE FOR SO MANY DIFFERENT POSSIBILITIES?

Choices and consequences. It's something we popularised and put emphasis on since the beginning of *The Witcher* series. Basically, you make a choice (remember, inaction is also a choice!) and you have to face its consequences. This mechanic allows us to weave a lot of moments into gameplay which influence the world during later parts of the game, and determine one of the many endings you'll see when you beat the main story arc. We have certain key choices throughout the whole game and they culminate at the end. Everything's connected and it's done in a very non-intrusive way, sometimes you might not even think that that choice is so pivotal in the later part of the game.

> "GERALT IS AN ELITE WARRIOR WHO HUNTS BIG-ASS MONSTERS AND IS SECOND TO NONE WHEN IT COMES TO SOLVING PROBLEMS"
> MICHAŁ KRZEMIŃSKI SENIOR ART PRODUCER

In a lot of other RPGs, part of the appeal to players is the ability to create their character in their own image. Geralt is as rigid in his design as they come – how do you think offering the one, definite player character sets you apart from other RPGs?

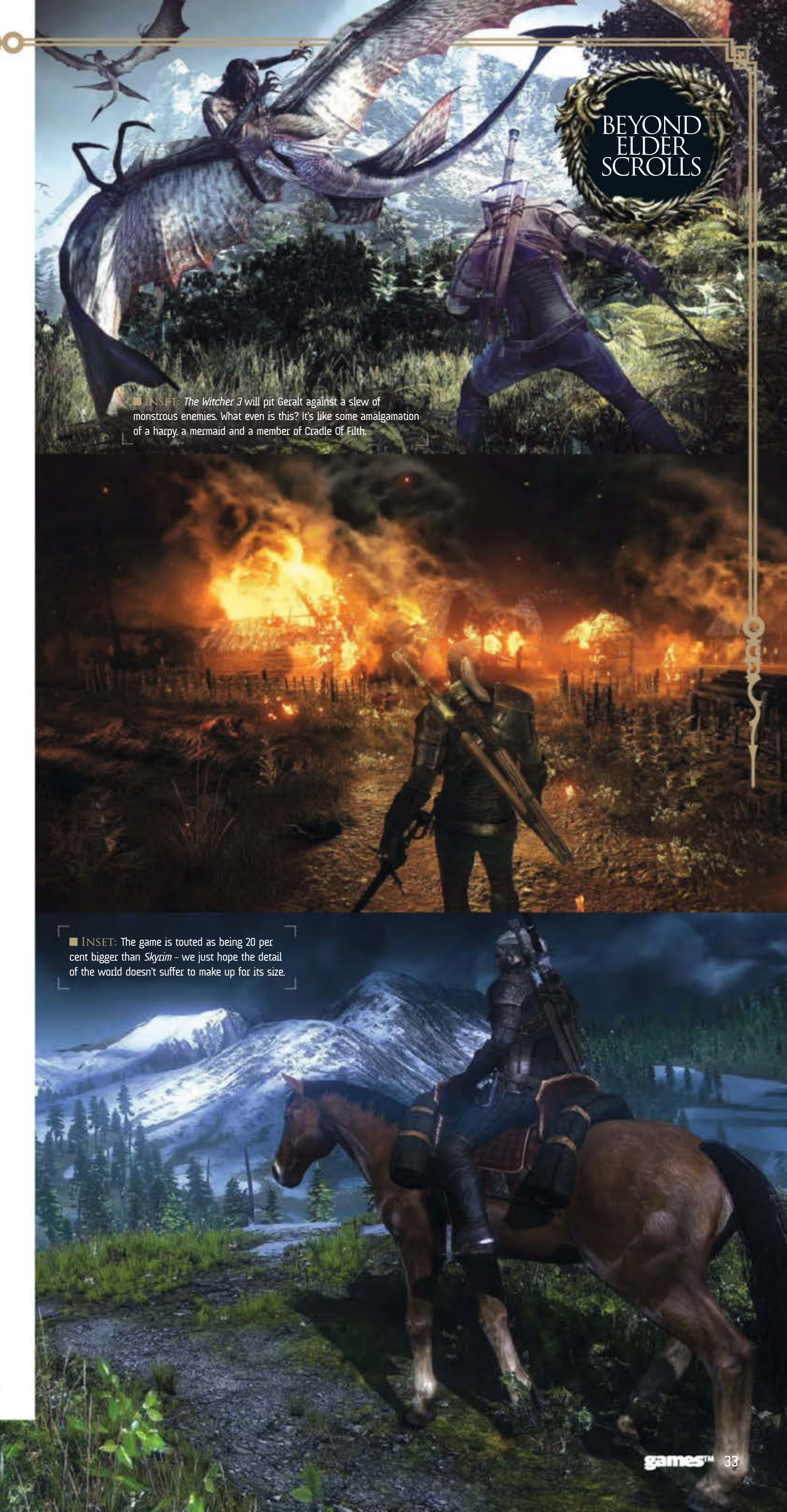
Ha! I could turn the question around and say that in a lot of other RPGs, part of the appeal to players is a strong, well-defined character, who is so awesome, you just don't want to change anything (well, some small cosmetic changes, maybe). Think Batman, think Lord Vader, think Lara Croft… We see Geralt as a guy who's so cool because of who he is; he's a witcher, an elite warrior who hunts big-ass monsters and is second to none when it comes to solving problems.

People often compare *The Witcher* series of games to *The Elder Scrolls* – do you think these comparisons are relevant? Do you think your series appeals to the same audience of Bethesda's?

That's a tough question. At their core, both games are RPGs and there is a big number of similarities between them. However, the deeper you go, the more differences you see. Ultimately, I think that *Skyrim* and *The Witcher 3* are entirely different games. *Skyrim* is a sandbox set in an open world. You get a set of game mechanics and you play with them. *The Witcher 3* is all about the story, it's the core of the whole game and around this core, you get a huge, open world with a ton of things to do. In terms of audience, well, I think that it's not the case that if you like *The Witcher*, you can't like the *Elder Scrolls* (or the other way around). You can like both games for what they offer and get a different kind of buzz from playing them.

What has the next-gen hardware allowed you to do specifically that was unobtainable on previous generations?

There's no one specific thing that next-gens allowed us to do. There's a whole ton of them. Essentially, the game can look mind blowing, we've got seamless gameplay with no loading screens (almost everything is streamed during gameplay, cutscenes etc.), we can add visual effects unavailable to us because of performance issues and so on, the list is huge. All this constitutes a giant, lush open world with a myriad of things to do, quests, adventures, monster hunts, events and so on.



■ INSET: *The Witcher 3* will pit Geralt against a slew of monstrous enemies. What even is this? It's like some amalgamation of a harpy, a mermaid and a member of Cradle Of Filth.

■ INSET: The game is touted as being 20 per cent bigger than *Skyrim* – we just hope the detail of the world doesn't suffer to make up for its size.

Child Of Light

CONCEPT ■ Aurora enters a world where the Queen of the Night holds the night sky hostage. It's all a coming of age metaphor, and it looks beautiful.

Proving UbiArt Framework is more than a one-trick pony

There just aren't enough hand-painted or hand-drawn games out there, and that's a shame. Looking back at just how well *Rayman Origins* and *Rayman Legends* were received, it's clear that the UbiArt Framework engine – and the hand-crafted game in general – has an attentive and supportive audience. We were beginning to mourn the UbiArt engine until we saw *Child Of Light* – the game looks set to take as much advantage of the engine as possible, and we find that incredibly reassuring.

Each level has been designed by illustrators that work closely with the game's artistic director, who between them hash out exactly how the world is going to look and feel. The process involves digital artists and physical artists, yet both teams liaise with each other at every single step of development in order to make sure their overall vision is being met.

Just by looking at the screens around these pages, you can see that this vision is something that has deep-rooted influences in classic fantasy imagery. The whole thing looks like a fairy tale, and that's kind of the point – *Child Of Light* takes place in a world very much seen through a child's eyes, and this perspective allows the game to be unique and innovative in its framework and imagery. It all runs on 2D planes, but 3D effects are used to give depth to the locales, hopefully creating a more immersive experience for the player at the same time. The whole aesthetic has a picture-book quality to it – like something you'd see illustrated by Arthur Rackham, accompanying a particularly fantastical Roald Dahl short story.

/// This all ties into how the game plays, too – *Child Of Light* is a game that's being intentionally developed to appeal to both children and their parents; the title's lead artist, Salomé Strappazzon, supports Ubisoft Montreal's decision to create games with this cross-generational appeal. "I'm proud to work on a game whose concept allows for real collaboration and connection between parents and children," she explained online, "*Child Of Light* is a game you can share with your child. Especially in light of all the criticism the gaming industry gets when it comes to violence and youngsters, *Child Of Light* is a really beautiful experience we can proudly share with children."

This is a surprising method of development for a game that fits into a genre that, by its very nature, is fairly inaccessible – the typical RPG is not exactly known as a forgiving or beginner-friendly experience. But then again, it seems that *Child Of Light* doesn't want to sell itself as a 'typical RPG' – while it may feature elements you'd only ever find in the role-playing game (active-time battles similar to those found in *Final Fantasy VIII*, for example), there is also a large co-operative focus, and some quite diverse platforming mechanics.

Similarly to Ubisoft's own *Rayman Legends*, exploration will unfold in a strictly side-scrolling manner, with one player in charge of Aurora herself while the other takes control of her ethereal companion, Igniculus. Igniculus' specific function is currently the subject of speculation, but we think it's safe to assume that the globular blue familiar will function similarly to *Legends*' Murfy – that is to say, Igniculus will be used to navigate certain, trickier areas of the world and probably provide buffs or debuffs in battle.

> "Child Of Light is a really beautiful experience we can proudly play with our children"
> SALOMÉ STRAPPAZZON, LEAD ARTIST

Child Of Light is a peculiar amalgamation of genres, and represents a brave experiment on behalf of Ubisoft Montreal; if it works, the studio has the capacity to become a trailblazer (again), reinventing the side-scrolling brawler-cum-RPG-cum-platformer. Fusing a unique approach the role-playing game, while simultaneously proving the enduring worth of the UbiArt Framework, *Child Of Light* is a game we're going to be keeping a close eye on – we think it may truly do something unique with next-gen hardware.

Information

Details

Format: Cross-gen, PC, Wii U
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Release: 30 April 2014
Genre: Platform RPG
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

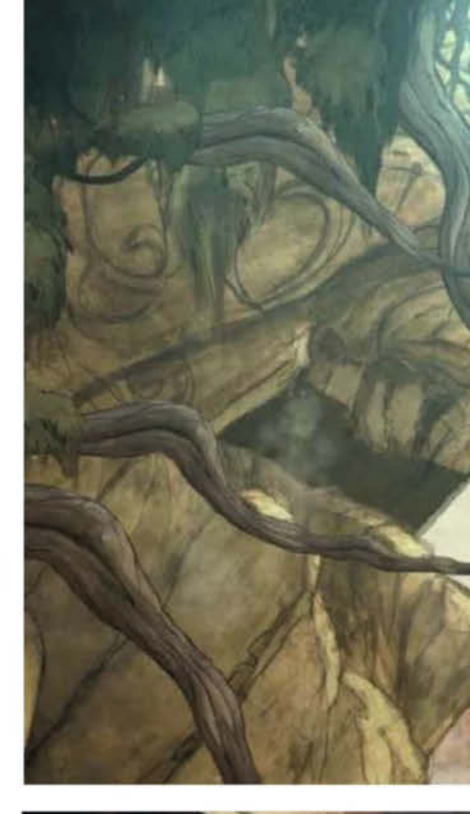
Ubisoft Montreal has been around since 1999, and began its watertight developmental journey working on smaller games for the GameCube and PC. Employing well over 2,300 staff, the studio has gone on to create and improve some of the most notable franchises out there; *Assassin's Creed*, *Far Cry* and *Splinter Cell*, to name only a few.

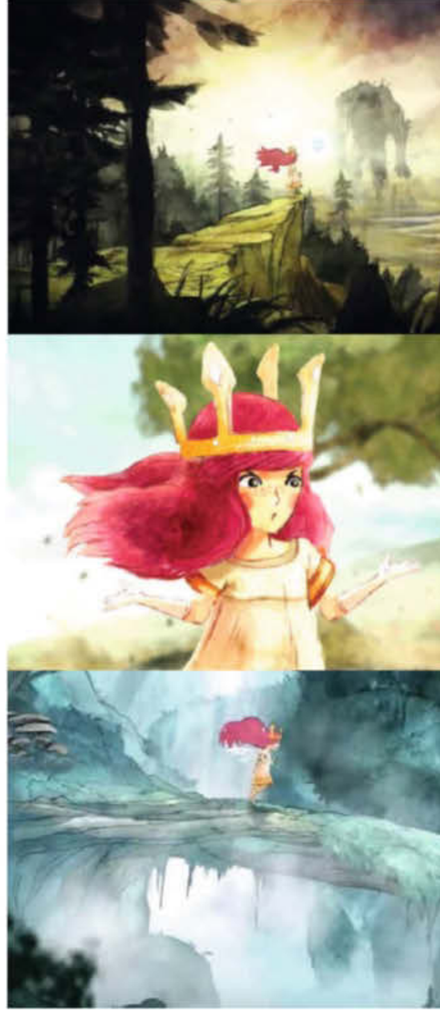
Developer History

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
Multi [2013]
Just Dance 3
Multi [2011]
Prince Of Persia
PS2, 360, PC [2008]

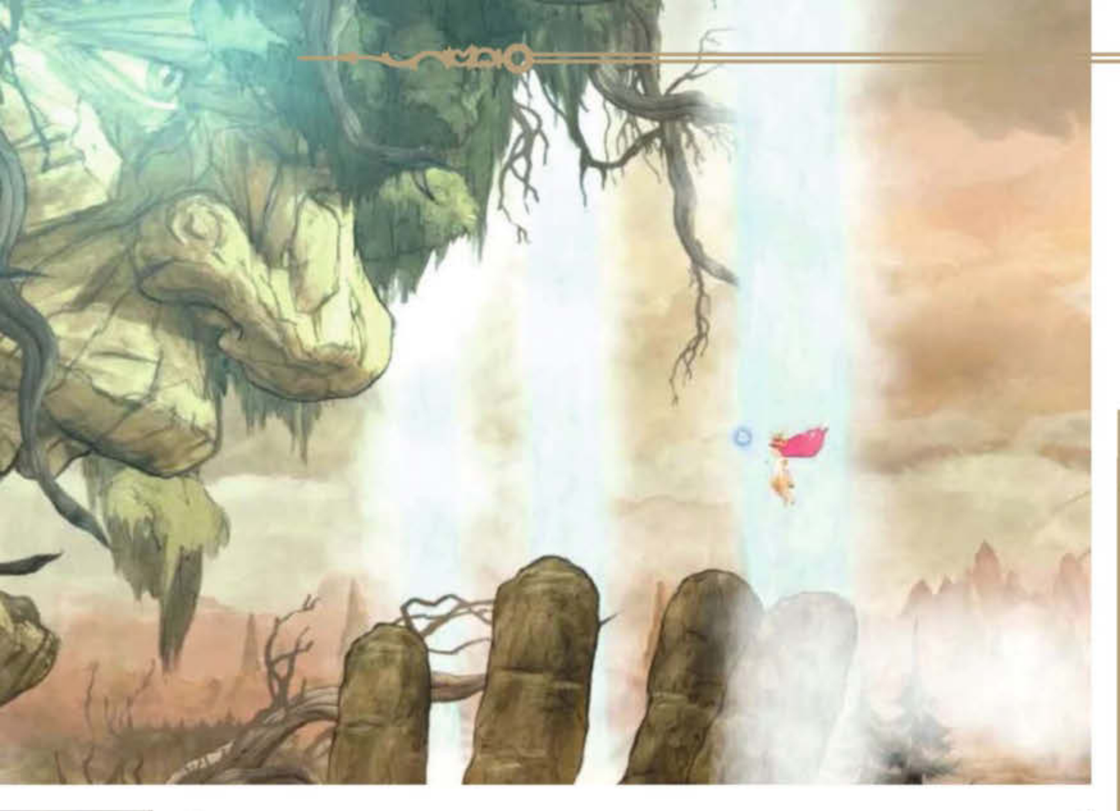
High Point

Our favourite Ubisoft Montreal title has to be *Assassin's Creed II* – taking everything that made the original unique and improving on it, the game proved that the studio was keen to listen and react to fan feedback.





■ Above: The 3D effects used on the 2D planes are lovely – that ominous fog really does look, well, ominous.





RUNNING OUT OF RHYME

An interesting verbal conceit that *Child Of Light* follows is its insistence on telling you everything with alternate rhyming structure – every first and third and second and fourth line rhymes. That's a pretty difficult feat to pull off on paper, let alone in a game. "My typical writing speed was cut in half," explains writer Jeffrey Yohalem on the dev blog, "Every four line stanza became a difficult puzzle on top of the structure of the scene, the characters' personalities and the meaning of the story." We expect this consistent rhyming pattern to act as a narrative seam, keeping the story together in a lilting and lyrical way, we just hope it doesn't become grating.



■ Above: Some of the character and level design is stunning – we can't wait to see how the high fantasy realm of Aurora's dreamscape looks in all its next-gen glory. Below: It seems battles will take place on isolated platforms – this suggests an emphasis on ranged attacks and magic.

■ There's every indication that BioWare has learned from the mistakes of *Dragon Age II*.

A LITTLE FORT GOES A LONG WAY

AS AN INQUISITOR, you have to make your presence felt throughout the land of Thedas – even when you're not around. You're an entity to be feared, and you don't want any of the rebels getting bolshy in your absence. To keep your imposing authority intact, you can seize strongholds in the name of the Inquisition, refitting them as you see fit to perform certain tasks: need some spies to gather information on the local towns for you? The espionage stronghold is for you. Want to get to the men of Thedas through their stomachs? You can set up forts to specialise in commerce and trade. Simply want to wreak bloody havoc on all those around you? Don't worry – military forts are, of course, an option too.



■ LEFT: The Inquisition themselves are a pretty imposing bunch, aren't they? We're enjoying the 'subtle' symbolism of the eye. 'We're always watching you,' it says. Obviously.

JRPGS TO KEEP YOUR EYE ON

Japanese developers we've met within the last year have been loath to use the term JRPG. However, it stands to reason that Japanese RPGs fall into their own category – they hit upon different audiences to the typical action-RPG or traditional Western RPG. Either way, we've compiled a list of the top 5 Japanese RPGs to keep track of over the coming months…



Kingdom Hearts 3

Spiky-haired action heroes and Disney characters, laced with a Final Fantasy flavour? Who *wouldn't* want that? *Kingdom Hearts 3* has been in development for next-gen consoles for a while, and promises to keep players involved during the epic boss battles by making the battle environment a weapon too.



Persona 5

No less than four *Persona* games have been announced since Sega's buyout of Atlus. The most exciting title is *Persona 5*, due on the PS3 in 2015 – a little behind the curve, but we're willing to let that slide if the game's as good as *Persona 4*. Still, with the 'darkest story the [series] has seen', this will be worth keeping your console for.



'X'

Monolith Soft's untitled project continues to intrigue us. Seeing a Wii U-only release, the action-RPG looks set to be a mix between *Titanfall*, *Final Fantasy XII* and *Xenoblade*. There's no formal release date for the game as of yet, but all the tech demos look pretty final, so we're expecting an announcement sooner, rather than later.



Demon Gaze

Seemingly inspired by the *Etrian Odyssey* series, *Demon Gaze* is a hardcore first-person dungeon crawler that breaks the norms of the genre and stands out by being overtly story-driven. Seeing a release on the Vita, *Demon Gaze* is a colourful throwback to old-school RPGs, made relevant for a new generation.



Project Phoenix

Project Phoenix is a game that achieved over ten times its goal on Kickstarter – that should be enough to get anyone's attention. The game sells itself as a JRPG with squad-based RTS design, and is being developed by a team of Japanese and Western veterans, due for release on PC, Mac, iOS, Android, PS4 and Vita.



BEYOND ELDER SCROLLS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA
Developer: BioWare
Release: Q3 2014
Genre: Action RPG
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Founded by medical doctors Ray Muzyka, Greg Zeschuk and Augustine Yip way back in 1995, BioWare consistently brings a refined and intelligent design philosophy to the RPG genre, pioneering subtle changes within the industry that serve to make their games mature, dignified and truly innovative.

Developer History

Mass Effect 3
2012 [Multi]
Dragon Age: Origins
2009 [Multi]
Baldur's Gate
1998 [PC, Mac]

High Point

The original *Mass Effect* introduced the world to a sci-fi RPG that has effectively become a younger generation's *Star Wars* – it laid the foundations of one of the most complete universes we've ever seen.

Dragon Age: Inquisition

CONCEPT ■ Fantasy's answer to the *Mass Effect* series returns, complete with humans, elves, dwarves, inter-species romance and, of course, dragons.

Breaking the lore

BioWare truly understands what the typical RPG player wants from a game – diving headfirst into a fantasy world, you want complete, blanketing immersion. You want to feel like your presence in the world accounts for something, that your actions and efforts have significant and obvious consequences. Within the majority of BioWare's earlier games (namely *Neverwinter Nights*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Jade Empire*), this feeling was achieved by making sure the worlds were crafted with a painstaking attention to detail. It made the various locales you'd explore seem like characters in and of themselves – and, going forward, that's a design facet that BioWare has only been improving upon.

Dragon Age: Inquisition is proving to be another step down this psycho-geographical path for the developer. *Origins* introduced players to Thedas, offering them a tantalising taste of the vibrant, colourful fantasy world *Dragon Age* would come to be synonymous with. The second game seemed to betray this world, though, hemming players into a closed, inhibitive city and guiding them through a claustrophobic narrative.

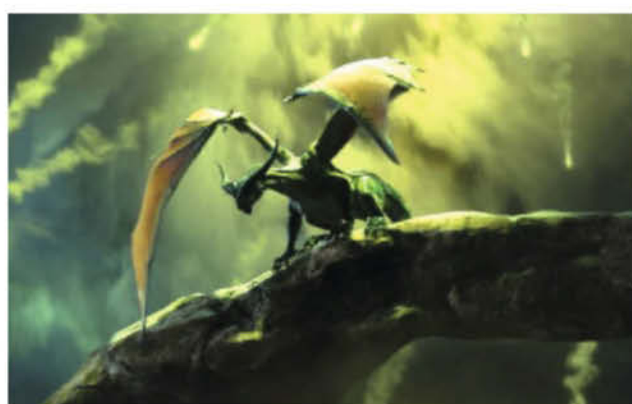
Dragon Age: Inquisition promises to rectify the sins of its forebear, though – apparently, the developer scoured *Skyrim* 'aggressively', taking the open-world cues from Bethesda's behemoth RPG to inform *Inquisition*'s design – one level in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, previously called *Dragon Age III*, is comparable to the size of the entirety of *Dragon Age II*. There will be no reused environments or assets spilling over from the past instalments of the franchise, either. BioWare is making sure not to make the same mistakes with this game that it did with *Dragon Age II*: everything in the game has been built from the ground up in the Frostbite 3 engine, and the title will feature playable post-story content.

> "One level in Dragon Age III is as big as all of the levels in Dragon Age II"
> JON PERRY, CINEMATIC DESIGNER

/// Another lesson seemingly hard learned is the studio's approach to player choice – after the furore around *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is taking great pains to make sure everything the Inquisitor (the player character) gets up to has a real impact on the world. The implementation of various playable races will also have an impact on how the story unfolds – the game purports to have a glut of race-specific content (so don't go expecing to get all of those achievements or trophies in one playthrough). *Dragon Age* as a franchise has become known for its companions – so far, it's been revealed that there are nine recruitable allies throughout the game that can be added to your party, and each one can also be completely customised – as long as you stay in keeping with their class restrictions. Like *BioShock Infinite*'s Elizabeth, these companions will aid your exploration – which the game has much more of an emphasis on than that of its predecessors – calling out whenever they've found something of interest in the local area.

Dragon Age: Inquisition proves that BioWare is keen to listen to its fans, and even though we saw the departure of the studios founders last year, its clear the team – under EA – is more than capable of pushing the RPG genre as far as it can be pushed for now, carrying on down the same road that Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk started walking 19 years ago.





■ LEFT: In spite of clearly being greatly inspired by Bethesda's genre-owning RPGs, *Inquisition* looks to retain its own sense of identity.

RIGHT: Player models are limited in variety at present – though this will be expanded before release – but already show the more stylised, less 3DSMax approach the team is going for.





EverQuest Next Landmark

CONCEPT A complete redesign for one of the oldest MMO franchises in existence. Will all-new game mechanics and a completely separate crafting game be enough to win back the *WOW* audience?

SOE is going full reboot for a legendary classic

To the question of how you completely redesign an MMO for a 21st Century audience, the answer Sony Online Entertainment appears to have settled on – as have so many game designers before – is *Minecraft*.

That's perhaps a little unfair, even if it is the most obvious comparison. Devotees of the previous instalment in one of the MMO genre's longest-running settings, have always shown a fondness for a more creative type of socialised gaming – often more so than their hardcore, raid-obsessed *WOW* rivals. Player housing, guild hall creations, item crafting and resource gathering had been fundamental to carving *EverQuest II*'s unique hooks during its now ten-year run. It was therefore only natural that in SOE's complete rethink of the *EQ* series' core principles, the 'crafting' game would be subject to an overhaul. What few people saw happening was it getting its own game.

What we have with *EverQuest Next* is two games. There's the main MMO, of which very little is known beyond the basics. *PlanetSide 2*'s ForgeLight engine provides a voxel-heavy world of deformable terrains, procedurally generated underground worlds, fluid character classes and player-led permanency.

And then there's *Landmark*. Still in an early Alpha stage, this is a crafter's paradise writ large. Sandbox worlds, object creation and manipulation tools, resource gathering, no monsters or violence as yet (unless you count axe-on-tree hate crimes) and, cunningly, a progression path linked to crafting. Quite aside from the usual resources/better tools/better resources merry-go-round, the building and editing tools are subject to crafting progression. You start with a basic ability to place simple cubes and spheres in your plot of land. Gather enough resources and build better crafting stations, and you'll be able to make more intricate world-manipulation tools, such as smoothers and scalers, allowing for equally more intricate construction projects.

///Proof of this builder's dreamland is all around the *Landmark* alpha test. Player constructions range from the simple square houses in the lower tier servers, up to vast mountain castles in the higher-ranked areas. For once, exploration in an MMO is justified as you never know what you're going to discover over the next hilltop from one day to another.

How both *Next* and *Landmark* feed into each other is something else that has only been hinted at by SOE. It's being said that noteworthy *Landmark* creations will make their way into *EQ Next* proper, making stars of the building community.

Of the many MMO staples that SOE has looked long and hard at, the one that will cause the most raised eyebrows is the news that *EQ Next* will be an F2P title. The *EverQuest* franchise has always been one of the stalwarts of the subscription-based model, but with an increasing need to focus on keeping player numbers high, so a move towards in-game purchasing to provide the game's ongoing funding becomes increasingly inevitable. SOE's stated goal is to not become another F2P villain like so many, but to build and retain trust with the player-base throughout. Currently, *Landmark* offers just the smallest glimpse at the grand *EverQuest Next* plan being diligently crafted by SOE. But aside from all the in-game features and design choices, what it perhaps shows more than anything else is just how earnest the team is being at every step along the way. There has never been a closer and more open working relationship between SOE and its audience than the one on display here.

> "We're doing our Free-to-Play strategy a lot different this time around. We intend to very much be the good guys"
> DAVE GEORGESON SONY ONLINE ENTERTAINMENT

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC/PS4
Origin: US
Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2014
Genre: World Building
Players: Massively Multiplayer

Developer Profile

Having developed the basic template for almost all MMOs to come with *EverQuest*, SOE's path has since been a rocky one, with as many highs (*EverQuest II, PlanetSide, DC Universe Online, Star Wars Galaxies* before the revamp) as lows (*The Matrix Online, Vanguard,* and *Star Wars Galaxies* after the revamp).

Developer History

EverQuest I & II **1999/2004 [PC]**
PlanetSide 1 & 2 **2003/2012 [PC]**
Star Wars Galaxies **2003 [PC]**
DC Universe Online **2011 [PC]**

High Point

SOE's reputation was forged by the immense success of the original (and still just about active) *EverQuest* and if it hadn't been for a certain *World Of Warcraft*, *EQ*'s sequel would have once again been the standard-bearer for MMOs.



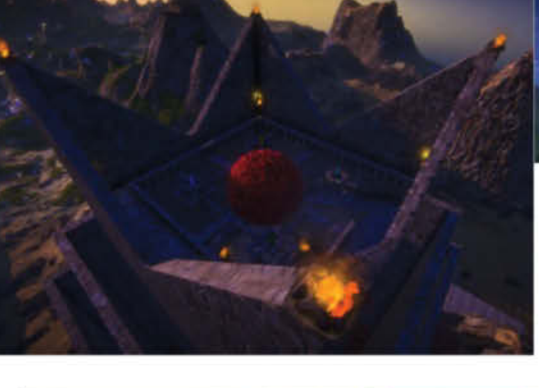


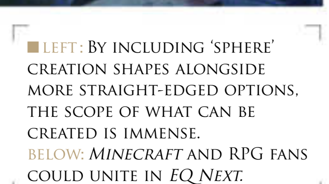


■ THERE ARE NO RESTRICTIONS PER SE ON WHAT PLAYERS CAN BUILD IN *LANDMARK*, ALTHOUGH SOE HAS STATED THAT THERE WILL BE MEASURES IN PLACE TO PREVENT NATURAL BORN GRIEFERS FROM FILLING LANDSCAPES WITH OFFENSIVE MATERIAL.

RETELLING OLD TALES

FROM A LORE perspective, SOE has rather wisely indicated that *EQ Next* isn't going to be part of the established Norrathian canon. Instead, it's rumoured to take place in an 'alternate universe' Norrath, one that doesn't clash with established settings, characters and events. This has two main effects. First, it gives the developers a free hand to reinvent things from the ground up, JJ Abrams' *Star Trek* style, while still maintaining an overall *EQ* feel. Second, it also removes the need for any in-house background writing teams to somehow justify the anachronistic player-made creations that will undoubtedly spring up in *Landmark* once the general public at large arrives in-world.





■ LEFT: BY INCLUDING 'SPHERE' CREATION SHAPES ALONGSIDE MORE STRAIGHT-EDGED OPTIONS, THE SCOPE OF WHAT CAN BE CREATED IS IMMENSE.
BELOW: *MINECRAFT* AND RPG FANS COULD UNITE IN *EQ NEXT*.





■ LEFT: THE ISOMETRIC VIEWPOINT CAPTURES THE ESSENCE OF THE ORIGINAL *WASTELAND*.



WASTELAND 2

CONCEPT ■ Finally the first official sequel to the 1988 *Wasteland* arrives thanks to a successful Kickstarter campaign. Will you be able to survive the apocalypse once again?

RAIDING THE VAULT

This is the *Fallout 3* that fans of the original have been waiting for. While Bethesda's revival of the series was a remarkable technical and creative achievement, fans of *Wasteland* – the game that started it all – have been pining for a return to the series that started it all and, finally, that time has come.

Fans will already know this, of course, having had the opportunity to grab a slice of the post-apocalyptic pie since it was released in beta back in December. However, it wasn't the best debut, with framerate issues and a (planned) UI overhaul hampering this early peek into the long-awaited return to Brian Fargo's original radiated wilderness. Yet, it retains the inimitable quality that made *Wasteland* so beloved in the first place.

This is a turn-based role-playing game set on a nuked Earth, where bandits, mutated wildlife, cyborgs and feuding clans are all part of daily life for a band of roaming lawgivers. These encounters can be resolved a number of ways, with violence not always the wisest option when you can talk your way out of plenty of scraps.

At its essence, this is the sequel that it always claimed it would be: an exploration of a far more tongue-in-cheek after Earth, with a sharper wit and less sombre mood than more recent portrayals of The End Of The World have given us. The first mission has your band of four law enforcers presented with a classic RPG dilemma: two settlements are in dire need of assistance and you can only have time to save one. But far from the effect of this rippling further down the stream of towns, tribes and NPCs, *Wasteland 2* endows the player with a radio, so you witness the grizzly demise of the settlement you chose to abandon in an excruciating beat-by-beat commentary of events.

Wasteland 2 truly relishes in its old-school sensibilities; its design unapologetically regressive compared to the recent revival and adaptation of the turn-based RPG. Combat inserts a few animation and tactical flourishes but otherwise relies on the same combination of weapon specialties and studying statistics to gain the upper hand. Purists who prefer a leisurely battle will feel right at home, but those expecting an progressive slant on the original's mechanics à la *XCOM* will be left cold by its approach.

But this is a game that has been made purely for the fans and it shows. It's a bold move: it's a game that doesn't just try to replicate the spirit of the original, but lives inside it – a sequel that could've feasibly been made a few years after the original. If anything, it proves the enduring power of *Wasteland*'s concept and sometimes you just can't beat the classics.



■ BELOW: THE GAMEPLAY IS BOTH TURN-BASED AND PARTY-BASED, WITH UP TO SEVEN PLAYERS RECRUITABLE.



"TRUE FALLOUT FANS WILL ENJOY WASTELAND 2 LIKE THEY DID WITH THE FIRST TWO FALLOUTS"

BRIAN FARGO, INXILE ENTERTAINMENT

INFORMATION

DETAILS

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: US
Publisher: InXile Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2014
Genre: RPG
Players: 1

DEVELOPER PROFILE

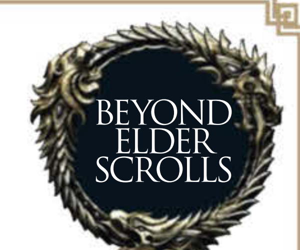
Founded in 2002 by Interplay's Brian Fargo, the studio has worked on *The Bard's Tale* and across several notable iOS titles before its biggest release, *Hunted: The Demon's Forge*, landed on consoles in 2011. After successfully launching a Kickstarter campaign to bring back *Wasteland 2*, the studio has been concentrating on resurrecting the brand.

DEVELOPER HISTORY

Choplifter **2012 [Multi]**
Hunted: The Demon's Forge **2011 [Multi]**
Super Stacker **2009 [iOS]**
The Bard's Tale **2004 [Multi]**

HIGH POINT

A humorous dungeon-crawler that spends a great amount of time lampooning RPGs, *The Bard's Tale* established InXile as one of the most imaginative and promising developers debuting in the industry.



Pillars Of Eternity

Back to the old school

Details **Format:** PC **Developer:** Obsidian Entertainment **Release:** Late 2014





■ ABOVE: Early concept art for Obsidian's next epic. RIGHT: The static visuals are stunning.

Whereas *Wasteland 2* has the benefit of being closely associated with two prestigious RPG franchises, *Pillars Of Eternity* has no such fortune. In fact, Obsidian Entertainment is taking a stab at creating a new fantasy saga based on the depth and nostalgia of classic isometric RPGs, citing *Icewind Dale*, *Baldur's Gate* and *Planescape: Torment* as dungeon crawling, exploration and narrative influences.

And, while *Pillars Of Eternity* will utilise a custom rule system inspired by a range of classic and contemporary fantasy role-playing games, it shucks the traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* model for something that emboldened the development team creatively. For instance, combat moves away from the Infinity Engine's limiting structure and invisible dice rolls and instead relies on timing and skill. Your fate is now in your own hands. The game goes much deeper with a flexible class system that buoys both combat and exploration, while its characters and races contribute to a rich and vivid fantasy lore that Obsidian is building. The studio won't be drawn into plot specifics, only mentioning that there's an incident and from there the developer hands over the story to the player to choose which path to take.

What we do know, however, is that it's an imaginative playground that the developer has created, with its static backdrops brimming with colour and life with cascading waterfalls, fog-blighted ruins and sun-blasted fields. It's an odd game to come from the developer, considering the crude shenanigans of its last title, *South Park: The Stick of Truth*, but there's a parity between the two in that they share an old school sensibility that the developer simply excels at delivering. There's still much more to see and learn about *Pillars Of Eternity*, but Obsidian's contemporary twist on the classic RPG is shaping up to be one of the most captivating games of the year.

Final Fantasy XV

The realm is reborn once again

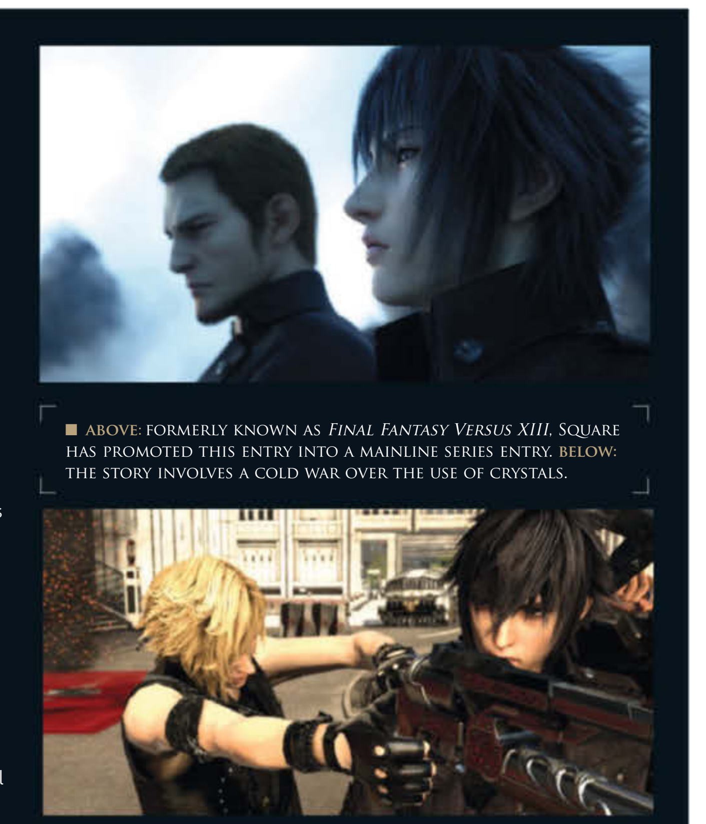
Details **Format:** PlayStation 4, Xbox One **Developer:** Square Enix **Release:** TBC 2014

Some people are never satisfied. While franchise purists baulked at some of the more contentious changes made throughout the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy, there's little question that it took decisive steps to evolve the formula that had begun to look staid.

Those hoping for a return to the turn-based combat that the series was founded on with pretty next-gen graphics will be disappointed. This is a game that ups the ante with regards to action and signals that the series is straying further away from its PSone/PS2 heyday.

Again, combat looks to be the big alteration here. There's an impressive kinetic flow to the gameplay we've seen, which utilises *Kingdom Hearts*' party-battle system effectively while adding more fluidity. In fact, everything we've seen points towards Square Enix having an eye on Western trends, particularly the sort of cinematic setpiece sequences that made *Uncharted* popular.

Still, it has the unmistakable flair of *Final Fantasy*; its slant on traditional action sequences is breathtaking as protagonist Noctis zips around in air combat, teleporting during on-ground skirmishes and fending off screen-consuming bosses, all with dizzying spectacle. If Square can deliver even a tiny bit of what it has promised so far, it'll be satisfaction guaranteed.



■ ABOVE: Formerly known as *Final Fantasy Versus XIII*, Square has promoted this entry into a mainline series entry. BELOW: The story involves a cold war over the use of crystals.

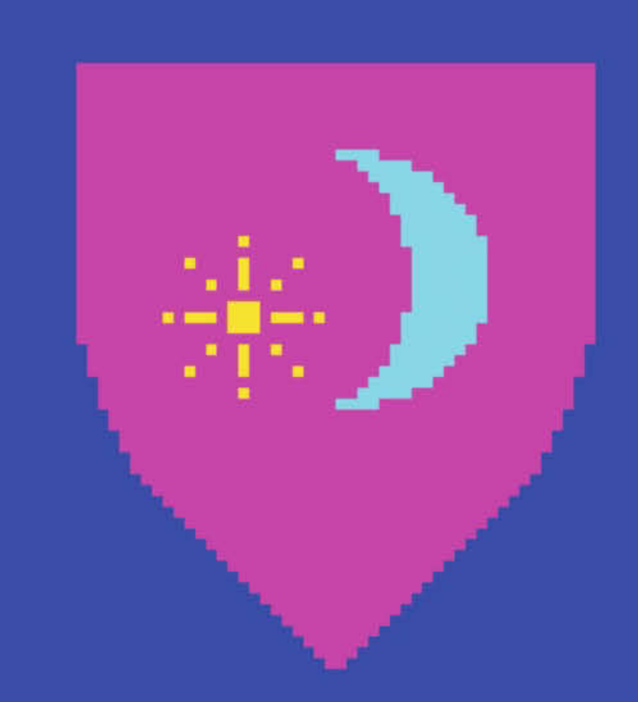


Lords Of Midnight

JULIAN GOLLOP, GOLLOP GAMES

Lords Of Midnight was a monumental game for me, opening my eyes up to what was possible in computer game design. This was a massive fantasy wargame and adventure quest rolled into one, and compressed into a mere 48k of ZX Spectrum RAM. I marvelled at the innovative pseudo-3D view of the world, which you viewed from first person. It used a simple billboarding technique but I had never seen anything like it before. I tended to play it more as a wargame, recruiting as many Lords as possible and rallying their armies in the battle against Doomdark, the Witchking of Midnight. I distinctly remember carefully making my own map of the land of Midnight by filling in symbols on squared paper. It was thrilling! Sadly, the game's creator, Mike Singleton, died in 2012, just as his game was about to be relaunched for the iPad. He certainly inspired me to pursue my career in game design, and I have many fond memories of exploring the worlds he created.

ONPRINCE
the
eath,
to the
imeril.



> "Lords of Midnight was a monumental game for me, opening my eyes up to what was possible in computer game design"
>
> JULIAN GOLLOP, GOLLOP GAMES

"Hacking and cyber-paranoia are very relevant topics from a gameplay perspective, and a narrative one"
DOMINIC GUAY, PRODUCER UBISOFT MONTREAL



Just look at that fierce determination in Aiden's eyes. This is a man that takes his vigilantism seriously – he's even got a gun. Move over, Batman.





INFORMATION

Details

Format:
PC, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360, Xbox One, Wii U
Origin:
Canada
Publisher:
Ubisoft
Developer:
Ubisoft Montreal
Release:
27 May
Genre:
Action adventure
Players:
1 (w/ asynchronous multiplayer)

Developer Profile

Practising since 1999, Ubisoft Montreal is responsible for the *Far Cry*, *Assassin's Creed* and *Splinter Cell* series, among many more.

Developer History

Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag
2013 [Multi]
Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon
2013 [Multi]
Just Dance 3
2011 [Wii, 360]
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Conviction
2010 [Multi]

High Point

Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon showed Ubisoft Montreal has an amazing sense of humour and the capability to make engaging games whilst being completely self-effacing. We approve.

Watch Dogs

CONCEPT ■ Aiden Pearce is a hacker that lives in Chicago, Illinois. His mission? Purge the corruption of the city by hacking his way through its central operating system

Every breath you take… I'll be watching you

Imagine being a hacker, the kind in the movies. Imagine having that virtual freedom to do whatever you wanted, all from the small rectangle of glass and plastic that you keep in your front pocket. Imagine walking down the street, thinking 'Hey, I want to cross that road' and simply opening an app on your phone that allows you to play with the traffic systems, changing that red light to a green one. Imagine getting irritated at your boss, and deciding to comb through his hard drive to find something incriminating. Imagine hitting upon some deep controversy, some illicit state secret, some potentially devastating subterfuge – what would you do? In the words of Peter Parker's inspirational uncle; "with great power comes great responsibility", and Aiden Pearce has got a *lot* of power.

When it was first announced, many compared *Watch Dogs* to *Grand Theft Auto* – both are situated in a sandbox metropolis where you're given free rein to do as you please. The cities of Chicago (or Los Santos) are moral grey zones – you're given carte blanche to do whatever you desire, as long as you play by the rules governing the game. The difference is, in *Watch Dogs*, your behaviour is consequential – *GTA* may have a broader pallet of chaos for you to spread, but *Watch Dogs* at least makes its colours more vivid.

This potential for anarchy is achieved by incorporating RPG elements into the *Watch Dogs* formula – as Aiden Pearce, you're thrown into a world of cyber vigilantism, snooping around trying to sniff out conspiracies and corruption wherever they may lie in the Windy City. The more you uncover – the more familiar you get with your hacking and your phone – the more slightly-too-real-for-comfort abilities become available to you. These are managed through a traditional skill tree, which can be climbed by collecting, typically, skill points (which are usually awarded upon mission completion). There's a sense of true progression with these skills – it feels like the process of unboxing your new smartphone, booting it up for the first time, looking down at the screen (beyond confused) and slowly getting to grips with exactly what it can do. Aiden's steady but solid progression emulates this – at first there's a sense of wonder when you remotely trigger a parked car's alarm or pop some metal bollards up from the tarmac – hacking into the ctOS makes you feel truly powerful. Then, slowly, you begin to crave more – 'Why can't I hack the train to stop here?' you'll find yourself asking, just before you unlock that ability.

/// *Watch Dogs* plays with its open world in a very knowing and promising manner. Ubisoft Montreal really has dedicated itself to crafting a world in which Big Brother operates on every street corner – playing directly into the city's horizontal design (moving away from the verticality Ubisoft Montreal seem to have perfected in the *Assassin's Creed* games). We were sceptical about just how much hacking could be done in a city – of how you could craft an entire game around that one, central premise – but when you think about it, there's pretty much limitless potential: even when it comes down to distracting Chicago's guards, there are myriad possibilities at your fingertips. Overload a fuse box, cause a city-wide blackout, fritz a nearby security camera, shut off their internal radio communications – it's your call. This game has been created with realism in mind, it seems, and you will have to suspend your disbelief at times, but for the most part, everything that Aiden's pulling off seems achievable – like you could go out there with your iPhone and do it yourself. It's unnerving, and it makes you think about the implications of all these people whose virtual lives you're actually effecting.

The story missions themselves fall into a kind of puzzle mode all of their own – you're going to want to learn your combat capabilities quickly (up against armed guards or policemen, Aiden is merely a pedestrian). The key to success is thinking about where you're going, applying a cerebral eye to the environment around you and plotting your actions. Don't just storm in – this isn't

Assassin's Creed or *Far Cry*; as in *Thief*, you *will* get killed. And anyway, why would you want to use that old-fashioned, messy gun when you have the untraceable, surgical accuracy of your mobile phone?

That gung-ho attitude doesn't really suit Aiden, anyway. If you want this game to be as immersive and engaging as possible, you'll want to live up to the character Ubisoft have spent its time developing with the story. It's a no frills narrative from everything we've seen so far – it's basically a *Batman* origin story if it was written by Charlie Brooker: think *Black Mirror* meets *Batman: Year One*. Aiden has been a hacker for a while when we meet him – a highly proficient one, at that. He one day stumbles onto something a little bit too delicate for the powers that be to leave alone, and they order a hit on him. As it turns out, they kill someone very close to Aiden, and in a completely non-predictable turn of events, he pulls a balaclava up over his nose, lowers his voice to a husky growl, becomes a reckless vigilante and swears revenge on those responsible for killing Lena Pearce (all the while blaming himself, seemingly on a path of rampant self-destruction). From what we've seen so far, Aiden is actually most reminiscent of *Watchmen*'s Rorschach – the Byronic vigilante with a moral compass that can't rest on any one direction. This set-up could give us a game like a great graphic novel, or just a hammily-acted soap.

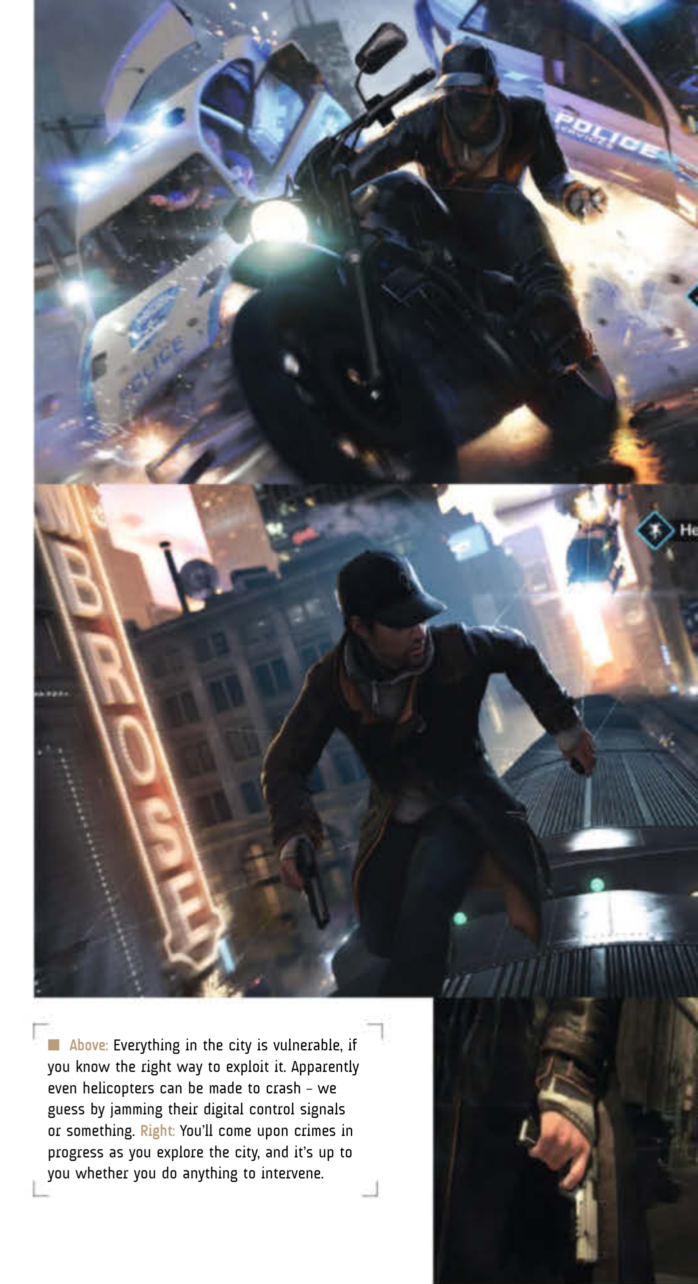
Supported by a cast of characters that all seem to shop in CyberDog, Aiden begins to pick holes in the false reality the Chicago kingpins have created for their dumb public. There's a delicately woven theme of techno-paranoia and cyber-voyeurism spread throughout the story, too, underpinning all of Aiden's relationships – every single person you meet could be out to get you, feeding you false information and leading you down some dead-ended rabbit hole. Ubisoft has said before that *Watch Dogs* is intended to run on as a franchise, so expect the characterisation of the secondary characters to be as strong and focused as that of Aiden himself.

/// One of the things that's intrigued us most about *Watch Dogs* is the grey morality of it all – there isn't some concrete meter measuring exactly how much of a hero or villain you are, à la *InFamous;* it's the public's dynamic reaction to you that indicates your current standing. If you decide you want to get over to the other side of the city in a vehicle that isn't yours, say, and a pedestrian spots you breaking in, two things could happen: if your notoriety isn't working against you, the pedestrian will let you go (vigilantes can win the affections of the public here), but if you've recently broken into a bar and killed everyone because 'Well, why not?' then chances are that passer-by is going to call the fuzz on you.

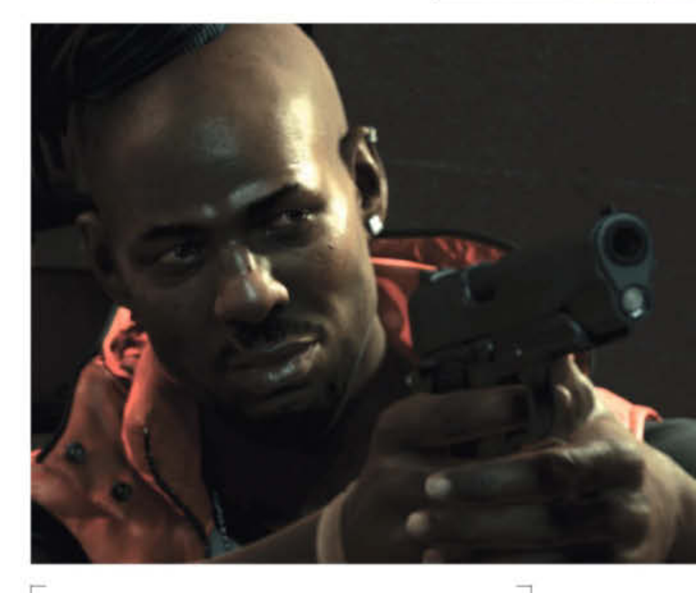
Compounding this dynamic response to player morality with moments that let *you* decide what's immoral and what isn't makes *Watch Dogs* unique – a lot of games pride themselves (even market themselves) on coming up with inventive ways of measuring your morality. *Watch Dogs* is more implicit than that, though; letting you decide what you should and shouldn't do, making you think about the implications of your actions – just because you *can* take money from that single mother's open account, should you? No-one's going to punish you if you decide to pilfer her finances – no-one's going to know – but if it elicits some feeling of guilt inside *you*, the player, then surely that's punishment enough? Using your phone you can profile those around you, siphoning information about their financial situation, their background, their lifestyle – whether you decide to help or hinder these NPCs is entirely down to you, and it's entirely optional, but the fact there are so many complete and interwoven narratives proves this game isn't just being thrown out into the wild without a considerable amount of attention to detail behind it.

> "We probably have more side content to get engaged with than we do main content"
>
> **DOMINIC GUAY, PRODUCER UBISOFT MONTREAL**

We want to criticise Ubisoft for making Aiden out to be some faceless pseudo-hero amongst a roster of other gaming pseudo-heroes, but we can't. In fact, we actually want to congratulate them: it seems the studio has hit upon something intrinsic to the open-world protagonist: he's husky, brooding, typically quiet, and for all intents and purposes, seemingly faceless. He's an avatar – a character for those intending to sink 40+ hours into *Watch Dogs* to project themselves onto. We think this game is exploring some themes that have yet to be examined widely in the greater media spectrum, let alone videogames, and the gameplay appears to be as watertight as you'd expect from a Ubisoft Montreal release… we just hope its innovations in the thematic and narrative space will reflect on the game as promisingly as its premise.



Above: Everything in the city is vulnerable, if you know the right way to exploit it. Apparently even helicopters can be made to crash – we guess by jamming their digital control signals or something. Right: You'll come upon crimes in progress as you explore the city, and it's up to you whether you do anything to intervene.

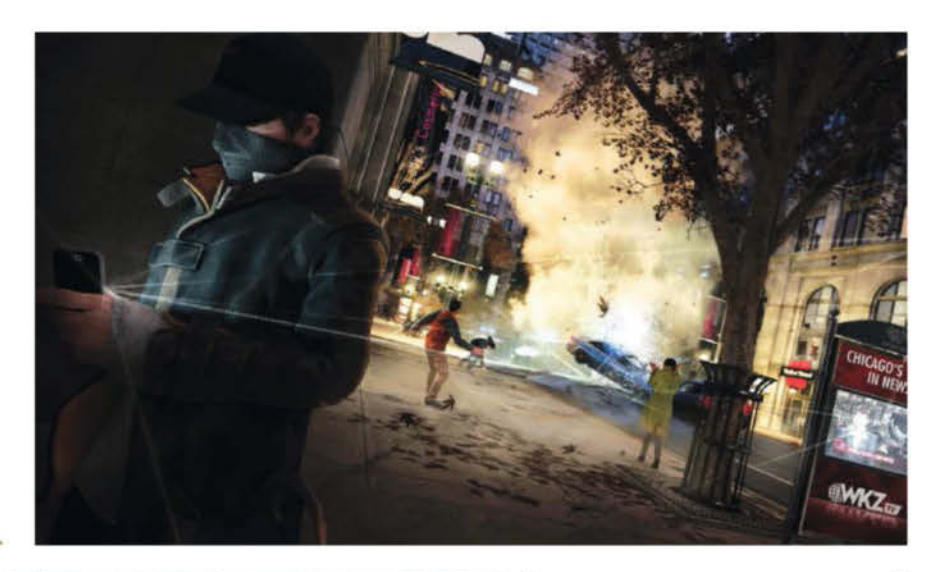


Above: We expect the game to look absolutely stunning when it's up and running on the PS4 or Xbox One. Still no word of a Wii U release.



FASHION HOUND

IN TRUE RPG style, you can equip Aiden with a plethora of apparel, available from the local Chicago fashion outlets. His default trench coat and cadet cap combo makes him look a little on the sexual predator side, so you're going to want to change things up if the local constabulary ever cottons on to your hacking antics. There are some inconspicuous neon numbers to choose, or full-on Camo getup if you prefer. We're not sure if these clothes options will have any significant effect on gameplay (think Altaïr's armour in *Assassin's Creed II*), but either way – we appreciate the ability to don Aiden in whatever we like (we want to make him full-on cyberpunk, but we'll see what happens…)





Left: There are some instances where force will have to be used. In these scenarios, it's always better to draw as little attention to yourself as possible – Aiden can use silenced handguns, non-lethal strikes and other more discreet methods of supressing his enemies. Below: This is the lady that gives you your special phone – the phone that hacks into things and destroy things. In many ways, she's your enabler. Cheers, lady, for getting us hooked.



CTOS VS. IOS

THE WHOLE OF Chicago's technical infrastructure operates on the ctOS – think of it as a central nervous system of connected machines and applications. Aiden has direct access to this network, hence why he can hack so expertly into anything he so desires… and so can you. Using a tablet or phone, you can bring up a map of the city on the fly – deploying bollards, altering traffic lights, shorting out cameras merely by tapping them on your second screen. Whether this will prove to be genuinely useful or just another gimmick remains to be seen, but we feel the knowing inclusion of something like this in *Watch Dogs* is both darkly relevant and slyly playful.

ON(LINE) THE ROAD TO RIO

ALONGSIDE STANDARD FRIENDLIES, online modes include 'Online FIFA World Cup' and 'Road to Rio.' The former simply involves beating seven opponents in a row and winning the World Cup, while the latter is far more interesting and sees you relegated and promoted through 12 ranks. Each rank is represented by a host stadium, with Rio's Maracana itself at the top of the list, and promotion attained by winning enough games at each level. The first rank, for example, requires you to gain ten points from ten online games (ie three wins, one draw and six defeats is enough), with subsequent ranks raising the minimum points total. Each match sees you play someone from your own rank, meaning opponents get tougher as you get promoted.

Above: All 203 national teams recognised by FIFA are playable, meaning players that missed out on a World Cup appearance (including the talented likes of Poland's Lewandowski and Sweden's Ibrahimovic) are present and correct.







Left: Training mini-games above and beyond those found in *FIFA 14* have been added to teach newcomers the basics, although given how familiar we all are with the rules, it seems a little unnecessary.

2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil

CONCEPT ■ World Cup-branded edition of *FIFA*, featuring all 203 officially recognised national teams and a spattering of new gameplay ideas

It's not on next-gen, but does that Mata?

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Xbox 360, PlayStation 3
Origin: Canada
Publisher: EA Sports
Developer: EA Canada
Release: 17 April (Japan: 24 April/ US: 15 April)
Genre: Sports
Players: 1-32

Developer Profile

EA Canada has been in charge of EA Sports' football output for well over a decade, however their good work can be traced all the way back to the superlative *NHL '94*. Their sights are not solely focused on sports simulations, though, having also developed the arcade-focused likes of *FIFA Street*, *SSX* and *FaceBreaker*.

Developer History

FIFA 14
2013 [Multi]
NHL 14
2013 [Multi]
FIFA Street
2012 [Multi]

High Point

While *FIFA*'s quality speaks for itself, *NHL* is the real pinnacle of EA Canada's output and is, without question, a contender for the greatest sports franchise of all time.

The most striking thing about EA Sports' *2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil* is that it's not coming to next-generation consoles. It's not coming to PC, either. Unless you have a 360 or PS3 and are still keen to pay full price for their games, then you're going to be missing out on the digital version of this summer's greatest event.

Clearly, EA doesn't want to expend too many resources on what is essentially a spin-off title and is therefore concentrating all of its rationed effort on those systems with the largest install base. Despite the limited release, the promise with *World Cup* is that it features the most exhaustive gameplay features of any *FIFA* yet.

Dribbling has been reworked, with players keeping the ball closer to their feet, making it more difficult for opponents to tackle you. This means you're more likely, with expert dribblers like Ronaldo, at least, to make it through defensive traffic without losing control – although your ability to retain control is significantly hampered when sprinting.

Heightened control also extends to receiving the ball. A major complaint with *FIFA 14* is that even the best players too often fail in their attempts to trap and take possession of the ball from simple passes, resulting in a stunted attack or turning the ball over. This occurs much less often in *World Cup*, thanks to what EA Sports is calling 'explosive movement' (players reacting quicker to your input) and a promised 100 new animations that gives each player more options in how they move and interact with the ball.

Potentially the most impactful of these new animations are 'over-the-head' headers, allowing players to jump over the backs of others in a bid to get their own head to the ball before the other has had time to jump. This works for defenders trying to prevent an attacker knocking down a long ball, as well as for strikers trying to gain an advantage during corners. Given that scoring goals from corners has long been too easy in *FIFA*, we're not convinced that giving attackers more options in this area is wise, although it is nice to see more real-world behaviour included.

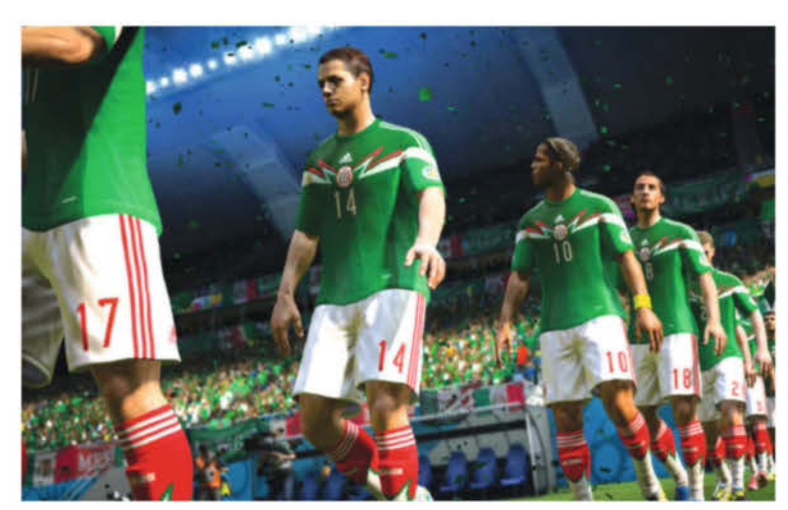
/// Better command of corners is provided through a new pop-up menu, where you tell your teammates how to act before, during and after the ball is played. You can set them to attack the near post, the far post, to crowd around the keeper or look for a cross to the edge of the box. It's down to you to execute the kick itself to suit your chosen plan of attack, so don't expect things to pan out as you've drawn up without the correct pace and angle on the cross.

> "Our goal is to create the most immersive representation of the world's biggest sporting event"
> MATT PRIOR, PRODUCER EA SPORTS

If all of this sounds complex it's because it is; anyone without prior *FIFA* experience is going to struggle to recognise, let alone execute, the intricacies of what each player and team is doing. To combat this the 'two-button' control scheme from *FIFA*'s past is available, selecting this option automatically sets the opposition AI to easy (read: idiotic) and gives you ample chance to replicate the kind of skill expected from Messi, Neymar and company.

Ten game modes are available, including the World Cup itself, the 'Road To World Cup' qualifying rounds and 'Story Of...' scenarios where you re-create important moments. These will be updated as the World Cup is played, where an hour after a significant match is played there'll be a relevant challenge for you in the game. For example, if England somehow bumbles its way to victory over Italy thanks to a goal from Daniel Sturridge and a clean sheet from Joe Hart, you might be asked to do the same. If you'd rather play as an individual, 'Captain Your Country' puts you in control of a single player – tasking you with rising through the ranks, eventually becoming captain of your nation and (hopefully) winning the World Cup.

All of this is loaded with the relevant and expected pomp and pageantry: official logos, samba-themed music and a digital re-creation of Sepp Blatter is even rolled out for important games. Perhaps, given the Blatter re-creation, it's worth investing in a full-price, limited-release spin-off after all...?





■ Above: As you'd expect, a lot of work has gone into replicating the carnival atmosphere likely to permeate this summer's tournament.

Below: There are a few sights more welcome than the warm glow of a rising sun. In *Rust* the nights are long, full of dangers and utterly dark. Torches are handy, but likely to get you killed.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: UK
Publisher: TBD
Developer: Facepunch Studios
Release: Early access out now
Genre: Multiplayer survival
Players: 1-256

Developer Profile

Based in the Midlands city of Walsall, Facepunch Studios was just one man, Garry Newman, who rose to indie prominence thanks to a little program called *Garry's Mod* that went on to sell 3.5m copies.

Developer History

Rust – Early Access
2013 (PC, Mac)
Garry's Mod
2006 (PC, Mac)

High Point

In eight years on Steam *Garry's Mod* has made $30m, with each new Valve game adding to the fun that can be had with the physics toy box. As impressive as that figure is, *Rust* has made more money in just a few months.

Rust

CONCEPT Naked and with rock in hand you must survive in world rich with resources, wild animals and Anonymous Internet People

In Rust we trust

R*ust* is one of those PC games that seems to come along with increasingly regularity. It's the type of thing you might ignore for a while on the basis that it looks entirely unremarkable, before it suddenly becomes a phenomenon that you end up buying if for no other reason than to find out what all the fuss is about. So far a million people have seen or heard enough to part with their cash and in the space of a few short months the game is now starting to give *DayZ* a run for its money. In short, it's well on the way to becoming the next big thing.

Conceived as a *DayZ* clone but with a greater emphasis on crafting and thus a greater scope for player cooperation, in recent weeks *Rust* has started to move away from the successful *ArmA* mod's dark shadow as zombies have been withdrawn from the post-apocalyptic backdrop. While it still plays on the same fears of loss and betrayal as its sole inspiration, with bands of players often hunting newcomers for sport, in *Rust* the landscape isn't quite so bleak or the outlook quite so grim.

You start the game with limited means, of course; no clothes, a couple of bandages, a torch to shout "Hello, come and kill me and take my stuff" and a rock to crack against trees for wood, boulders for stone and animals for much-needed food. It's a dangerous world, rich with carnivorous beasts and – depending on the server you join – stalked by sadistic humans, but where in *DayZ* there's very little to do except survive, in *Rust* there is the potential to thrive, for entire towns to rise out of the wasteland and for settlers to assert some sort of feudal order over the land.

Make it beyond your first encounter and you'll come across evidence of life even on the sparsest servers, from personal shacks with doors left open and cupboards ransacked, to elaborate wooden traps and shelters designed to keep small bands of players and their precious gear safe.

> "The players should decide how they play the game. You should be fearful of others. That is the whole point"
>
> GARRY NEWMAN, FACEPUNCH STUDIOS

Facepunch has made it very clear, explicitly on *Rust*'s Early Access page and implicit through its work on *Garry's Mod*, that it doesn't know precisely in what direction it is headed with *Rust*. The general aim is to provide a sandbox onto which players can build complex architectural and social structures, hopefully without requiring the formality of gameplay mechanics to keep them in place. Beyond that, player behaviour will drive development.

As much as there are shades of *Don't Starve* in the early game, as you gather the ingredients for survival and try not to die, the influence of *Eve Online*'s quiet social evolution becomes obvious. As the scope for cooperation and betrayal widens, *Rust* will become a difficult game to ignore.



Above: Food predominantly comes from animals, so if you're a vegetarian you may like to look away while our hero has his intestines exposed via antler.

CREATE THE ART OF THE FUTURE

www.3dartistonline.com

FREE DISC EVERY ISSUE

3DArtist

Available from all good newsagents and supermarkets

ON SALE NOW:

> Photoreal 3D > Arch-vis > Visual effects > Animation > 3D printing

TUTORIALS



INTERVIEWS



INDUSTRY INSIGHT



BEGINNER ADVICE



EXPERT GUIDES



BUY YOUR ISSUE TODAY

Print edition available at www.imagineshop.co.uk

Digital edition available at www.greatdigitalmags.com

Available on the following platforms

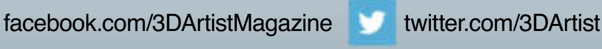




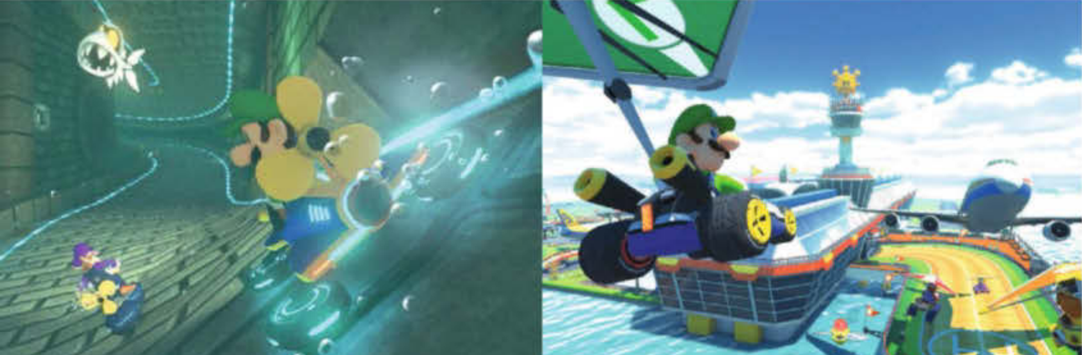


Desktop





One of the new courses takes place on an airport runway. Why? Because it can. We anticipate a slew of airline related obstacles.



ON THE RIGHT TRACK

THERE ARE CURRENTLY 19 confirmed tracks for *Mario Kart 8* – including returning courses from *Super Circuit*, *Double Dash*, *Mario Kart DS*, *Mario Kart Wii* and *Mario Kart 7*. Each course will see the new title's anti-gravity mechanics incorporated somehow, as well as hang-glider and underwater sections making a return from *Mario Kart 7*. The erstwhile Mario Circuit makes a return, but has been moulded into the shape of the Mobius strip, with floating islands connecting the course together and Princess Peach's castle standing tall in the middle. We'll also see Twisted Mansion – a course seemingly modelled on the *Luigi's Mansion* series of games.

Above: The underwater segments of the tracks are fraught with sub-aquatic peril – you're going to need a weapon or two to safely pass through them.
Right: Waluigi, Wario, Bowser, seven Koopalings – they're just some of the less savoury *Mario* cast that will be making an appearance in *Mario Kart 8*. Look at that sadistic grin on Waluigi's face – he's clearly got a blue shell up his sleeve.





Mario Kart 8

CONCEPT ■ We all know what the deal is here – it's Mario, he's in a kart and there will be a horrible track somewhere that has a rainbow motif

The Princess is in another chassis

***Mario Kart 8* has had one overriding development concept informing its creation – 3D.** By taking full advantage of the Wii U's hardware, Nintendo aims to bring experiment with all three dimension in *Mario Kart 8* – something that is apparently even reflected in the title. Where, you ask? Just tip that 8 on its side – it becomes a Möbius strip, the infinity symbol, and represents a large part of what *Mario Kart 8* is setting out to do.

We never thought we'd be talking about Möbius strips in relation to a *Mario* game, but there we go – it certainly proves Nintendo is willing to look into unique and interesting concepts to keep its releases fresh and relevant. The Möbius strip is a 3D object with 2D planes that allows objects to travel in two paths along it – which *Mario Kart 8* is using as a symbol for its anti-gravitational gameplay segments.

The implementation of anti-gravity in the game has allowed the developer to take a more left-field approach to designing each track (apparently, Nintendo was originally going to give the player 'burrowing' abilities with a drill attached to the front of each cart, taking the player to underground sections. This idea was dropped, however, when the developer decided to take full advantage of the Wii U's 3D capabilities). Rather than just the winding, up-and-down courses we've seen in the most recent *Mario Kart* games, *8* will allow players to glue themselves to the side of a track, or drive upside down on surfaces instead.

These sections are more bottlenecked than the open-ended hallways and arena-like trappings of *Mario Kart Wii*'s tracks, and you'll also see retro courses make a return, complete with all the fancy new features *Mario Kart 8* is introducing (we look forward to/are incredibly wary of seeing what Nintendo do with an upside down Rainbow Road…) During the anti-gravitational sections, jostling with other racers will grant speed boosts to the driver that connects with the most impact – combine that with the choke points on the course and you're guaranteed a more dynamic, competitive experience.

/// Considering *Mario Kart* has really always been about the competitive elbowing and the overall social experience ('Kart rage' is something we're all familiar with here at **games™**), we're pleased to see Nintendo drop the horizontal split screen and change it instead to a vertical one – this sounds like an insignificant alteration, but the reshuffle will allow players to see further ahead; focusing on what's coming up, rather than what's around them. This seems like an indication that *Mario Kart 8* is going to be faster-paced than other console *Mario Kart* releases, with more of an emphasis on getting *ahead* of your opponents, rather than holding them back.

> "Players with a taste for being bad can get ready to challenge gravity on the race track"
>
> PRESS RELEASE NINTENDO

The game will also see some subtle aesthetic changes, too – driving through the dark part of a course will now see your kart's headlines ping on. That doesn't sound like much, but hey – we're happy with any improvements to the central *Mario Kart* formula, no matter how passive. The game will also feature Miiverse integration in the form of '*Mario Kart TV*' – an addition that will hopefully liven up the oft-maligned social network with player-to-player challenges and videos that show off players' bragging rights.

With a confirmed roster of 24 characters (including Koopalings – who are playable for the first time in the series – and the fan favourite 'Baby' incarnations of Mario characters) as well as the return of Bikes, Buggies and Gliders, it's clear that Nintendo wants to keep the *Mario Kart* momentum in full swing. We usually see the series drop features as more are introduced, and the whole anti-gravitational thing could still end up being nothing more than a transparent gimmick, but we're hopeful that messing around with the laws of physics is going to help bring a whole new dimension to *Mario Kart*…

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo EAD Group No. 1
Release: 20 May 2014
Genre: Kart Racing
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

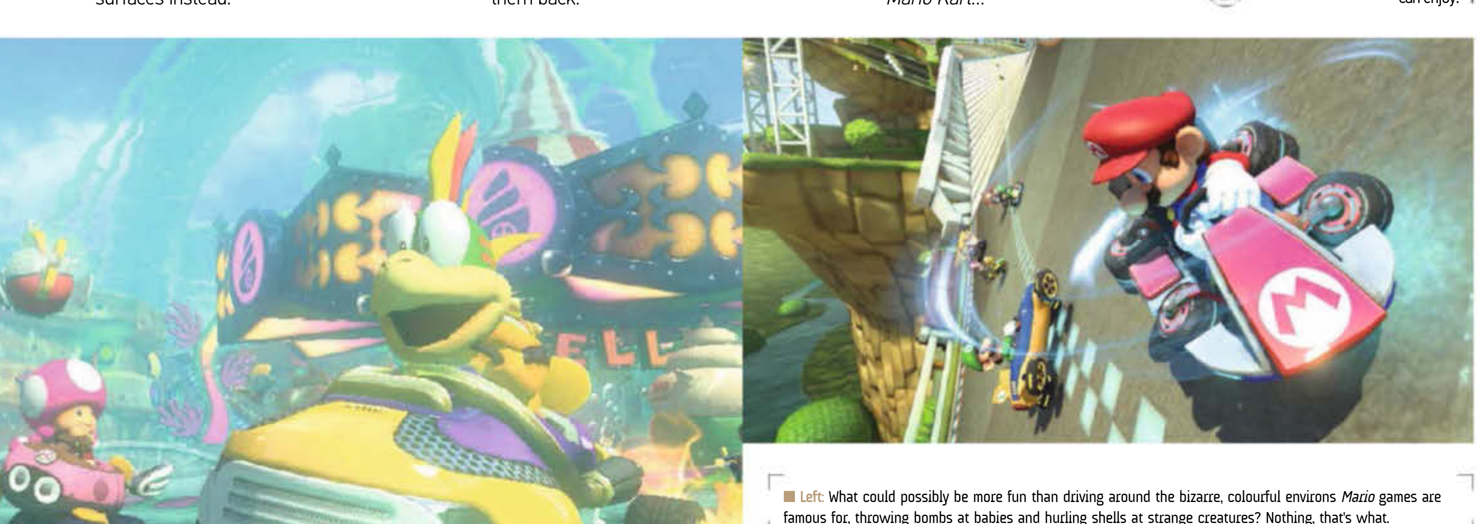
The Nintendo Entertainment Analysis and Development Group consists of fewer than 350 staff, yet is responsible for working on some of Nintendo's most iconic franchises. The EAD is the largest division within Nintendo's internal structure.

Developer History

Mario Kart 7 **2011 [3DS]**
Nintendogs + Cats **2011 [3DS]**
Mario Kart Wii **2008 [Wii]**

High Point

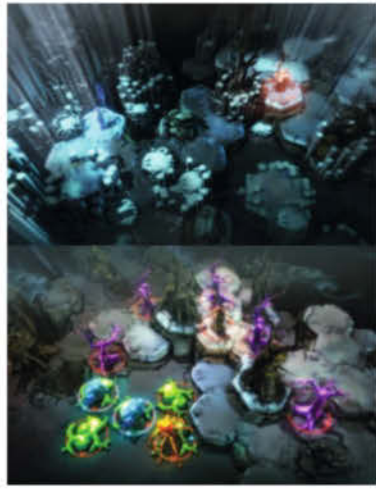
Mario Kart Wii kept us entertained for hours – whether it was during office hours, or back at home with the family; it's a delightful game everyone can enjoy.



■ Left: What could possibly be more fun than driving around the bizarre, colourful environs *Mario* games are famous for, throwing bombs at babies and hurling shells at strange creatures? Nothing, that's what.



"Although core gameplay of wizardly combat remains faithful to the original Chaos, there is a whole new RPG aspect"
JULIAN GOLLOP, GOLLOP GAMES



Summoned creatures can be mounted by other summoned creatures, to create flying archers, or perhaps you'd rather have your wizard riding a lion?

Chaos Reborn

CONCEPT The creator of *X-COM* returns to his roots with a turn-based battle arena game starring dueling wizards and a cast of minions

The battle of the wizards resumes

It's not every day you get an offer to play a game straight from the development cauldron of one of the UK's most celebrated game designers, so when Julian Gollop, the creator of *X-COM* and numerous other tactical delights, challenged us to an online game of *Chaos Reborn*, how could we not refuse?

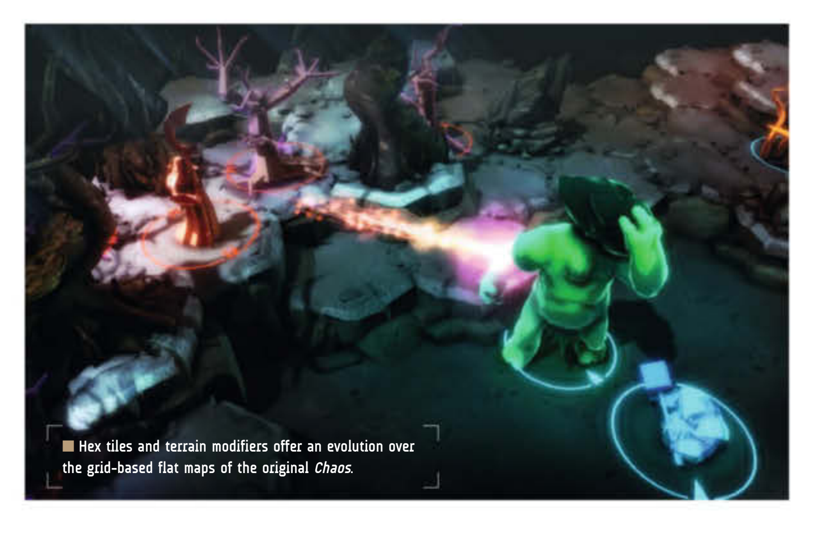
Truth be told we managed to stall him for a few hours while we hunted down a copy of the original *Chaos*, the 1985 game of wizardly combat that launched Gollop's career and twenty years later was listed by **games™** as the 44th best game ever made. As familiar as we are with its unique mix of spell-casting, creature summoning and duelling, we figured we needed to brush up on our conjuring if we were to defeat the godfather of tactical turn-based combat at his own game.

It was a sound strategy, for while *Chaos Reborn* is Gollop's third attempt to build upon the magic of the original *Chaos*, in its current iteration it's also the closest to it, focusing on multiplayer king-of-the-hill arena combat rather than offering any single-player scenarios – those will come later.

Players begin in control of a wizard with a selection of one-use spells, with the aim of the game to defeat the enemy sorcerer by summoning creatures, calling forth barriers and traps or casting such fantasy staples as lightning, fireball, heal and shield. The trick is that your wizard is weak, while some of the creatures that can be summoned into being can be devastatingly powerful, whether they happen to be real or a bluff.

By way of example our opponent spends his first couple of turns summoning a Dwarf and a Giant Spider, an impressive first line of attack. In response, our attempts to fizzle up a Skeleton and a Zombie splutter, and in desperation we use up *Chaos*' most iconic spell, Gooey Blob, on the ground to block any enemy advance. As the turns play out, Gollop's strategy becomes clear: to mix up low-level summoning spells that have a high chance of success, with high-level illusions of powerful creatures to instill a sense of panic. It works brilliantly: Holding back our Dragon spell to the end, a last-gasp gamble to summon the real thing fails just as Gollop's Dragon swoops in and deals the final blow.

Thankfully, we can blame our crushing defeat on the game being far from complete, with only a few creatures and spells currently implemented. Then again, perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised. Gollop has had *Chaos* in his blood for 30 years and assuming his current Kickstarter attempt comes good, it will likely consume him for a good few more.



Hex tiles and terrain modifiers offer an evolution over the grid-based flat maps of the original *Chaos*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: Bulgaria
Publisher: TBD
Developer: Gollop Games
Release: Q2 2015
Genre: Turn-based strategy
Players: 1-6

Developer Profile

In the mid to late Eighties Julian Gollop had a string of hits, starting with the original *Chaos*, followed with *Rebelstar* and *Laser Squad*. Both would directly inspire *X-COM* and, then, seemingly surpass it, with *Laser Squad Nemesis* in 2002 and a new *Rebelstar* on GBA in 2005.

Developer History

Ghost Recon: Shadow Wars **2011 (3DS)**
Rebelstar: Tactical Command **2005 (GBA)**
X-COM: Apocalypse **1997 (PC)**
UFO: Enemy Unknown **1994 (PC, Playstation, Amiga)**

High Point

Julian Gollop will forever be associated with *X-COM*, a series that offered three classic strategy games (two from Gollop himself), a passable space shooter and a string of below-par and promising but cancelled spin-offs.



■ Everything in the world of Dusk is grey, including Ronan. The orange spots on his torso are reminders of the bullets he took while still alive.



SALEM TO HEAVEN

THE TOWN OF Salem, after the first couple of investigations, is open for you to explore in a bid to uncover story-enriching collectibles and sidequests. Most interesting of this optional content are items that reveal a love story between Ronan and his wife Julia, a young woman who is already dead. Seeking out these items, even early in the game, adds weight to Ronan's desire to pass through Dusk and get into Heaven. Not only does he have extra incentive to complete his goal, but the fact that he cares deeply for another person helps to flesh out his character.

■ Above: Ronan is guided through the world of Dusk by a young and seemingly friendly ghost. However, early on in the game she is angry that you've stumbled across icons scribbled on these walls – suggesting that she may actually pose a threat.. Right: There are various collectibles to be found across Salem, including these scribbles of a young ghost that are sure to hold a deeper meaning.



Murdered: Soul Suspect

CONCEPT ■ A high profile detective is murdered by a mysterious stranger. In ghost form, you must work out who killed him/you and why.

He was once a detective, now he's an 'inspectre'

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, for a game based on paranormal activity, *Murdered: Soul Suspect* arrived from peculiar beginnings. "Believe it or not, our creative director Yosuke Shiokawa was very influenced by *Die Hard* and John McClane," explains senior game design producer Eric Studer. "What would happen if McClane died? He wouldn't just give up if he became a ghost, he would continue fighting and would find a way to overcome the situation and beat the bad guys." Like McClane, *Murdered* protagonist Ronan O'Connor is a cop with little regard of the dividing line between law officer and vigilante. Unlike McClane, Ronan is dead and, as a ghost, your goal is to uncover the identity and motive/s of your murderer.

The opening sequence explains that until Ronan has solved this mystery he is stuck in 'Dusk', a purgatory between this life and the next within which you command paranormal powers. You can walk through solid walls, inhabit and influence the minds of the living and converse with other ghosts stuck in this halfway house. These tools, at the exclusion of direct combat or action sequences, are key to uncovering the truth.

/// Core gameplay revolves around searching and piecing together information extracted from crime scenes. This involves hunting for physical evidence, reliving the memories of witnesses (a ghost's trick, apparently) and manipulating the living cops at the scene to perform tasks that a ghost cannot. Ronan, for example, is unable to move or touch any real-world items – he just passes right through them.

Having died by being thrown out of a window, and then shot while laying unconscious in the street, the first two crime scenes are the street around Ronan's physical body and the apartment from which he was thrown. Neither of these areas present much in the way of challenge, simply involving moving around the environment and clicking on potential clues until an onscreen counter tells you you've found everything. You're then asked to highlight those most relevant to your investigation, and are graded on your ability to deduce exactly that. Hopefully the ease at which we progressed is the result of having only played the game's early moments, and that difficultly will ramp up as you dig into the plot.

"Detective games are very hard to make," says Studer when quizzed on the issue of difficultly. "It's a real challenge for us to design, because we want the player to feel a little bit lost. If the player goes into a crime scene and they already know everything about it then it would be boring. Having them come in and not know exactly what to do is kind of a good thing, but we can't have them get so frustrated that they put the controller down and walk away. That would be the worst thing for us. We always want the players to be thinking, that's most important – thinking about the crime scenes, thinking about where collectibles might be hidden, thinking about how to get past enemies."

> "Ghosts are tormented in some way, so there's built-in drama around them and a lot of potential for storytelling"
>
> ERIC STUDER AIRTIGHT GAMES

/// The enemies to which Studer refers are souls that have been trapped in Dusk for too long, resulting in demonic transformation. With no means of confronting these enemies directly, you're forced into a stealthier approach involving, quite literally, hiding inside the aforementioned witness memories – wisps of smoke that Airtight refers to as 'memory residues'. It's possible to sneak up behind and dispatch demons using what is essentially a 'stealth takedown', however, it's so difficult to shake them once you're seen that we prefer to remain concealed until they've passed.

"We've designed enemy encounters so that players can come into a space, see what they've got to work with and can then execute a strategy to succeed," Studer says. "The slower pace of a stealth approach is the right way for us to achieve that. We don't want it to feel like *Friday The 13th* or *Halloween* style action horror." The 'dead detective' concept is interesting; we're just hoping that this foundation isn't wasted.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi (Xbox One, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4, PlayStation 3, PC)
Origin: US
Publisher: Square Enix
Developer: Airtight Games
Release: June 2014
Genre: Adventure
Players: 1

Developer Profile

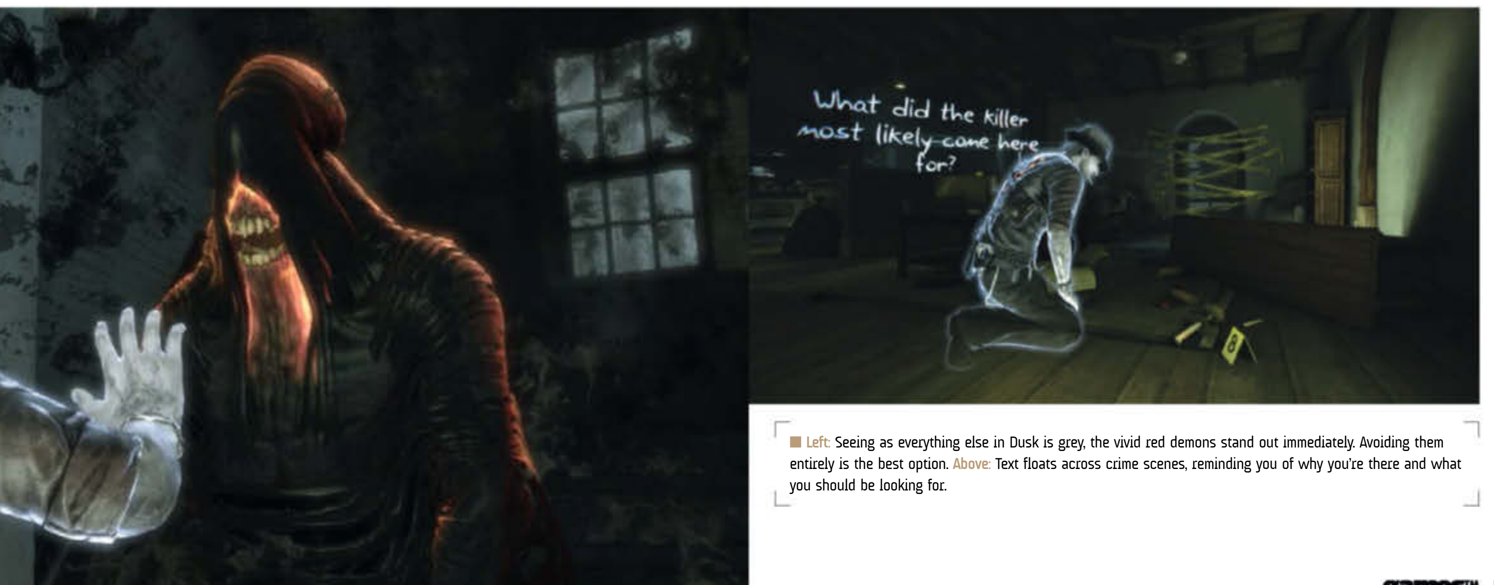
Founded in 2004, Airtight Games has had an underwhelming impact on videogames. 2012's *Quantum Conundrum*, though, remains one of the better first-person puzzlers of recent years.

Developer History

Dark Void **2010 [Multi]**
Quantum Conundrum **2012 [Multi]**
DerpBike **2013 [iOS]**

High Point

Quantum Conundrum, the first-person puzzler which sees you take control of four physics-altering dimensions in an attempt to rescue your uncle, Professor Quadwrangle.



■ Left: Seeing as everything else in Dusk is grey, the vivid red demons stand out immediately. Avoiding them entirely is the best option. Above: Text floats across crime scenes, reminding you of why you're there and what you should be looking for.

Tropico 5

CONCEPT The original banana republic simulator returns, tasking you with governing your populace whilst embezzling as much money as you can.

Tropical tax freeze

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PS4, Xbox 360, PC
Origin: Bulgaria
Publisher: Kalypso Media
Developer: Haemimont Games
Release: April 2014
Genre: Management Sim
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Haemimont Games has been up and running since 1997 and operates out of Sofia, Bulgaria. The studio consists of 50 staff, and specialises in RTS, simulation, world-building and strategy games. The developer has been working on the *Tropico* licence since the third instalment of the game.

Developer History

Omerta: City Of Gangsters
2013 [PC/Xbox 360]

Tropico 3
2009 [PC/Xbox 360]

Rising Kingdoms
2005 [PC]

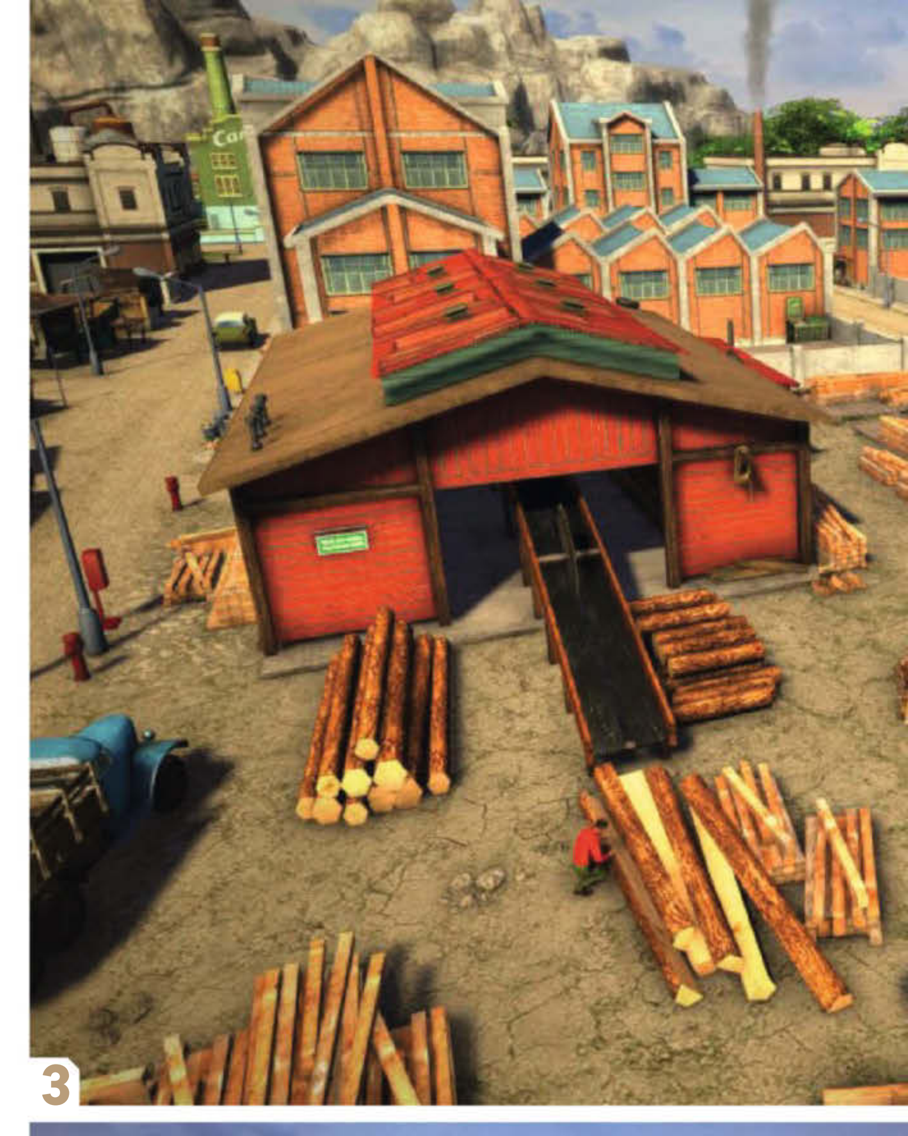
High Point

Omerta: City Of Gangsters launched to mixed reviews, but you have to agree that the *X-COM*-esque gameplay and languid jazz soundtrack came together to create a fantastic gangster paradise.

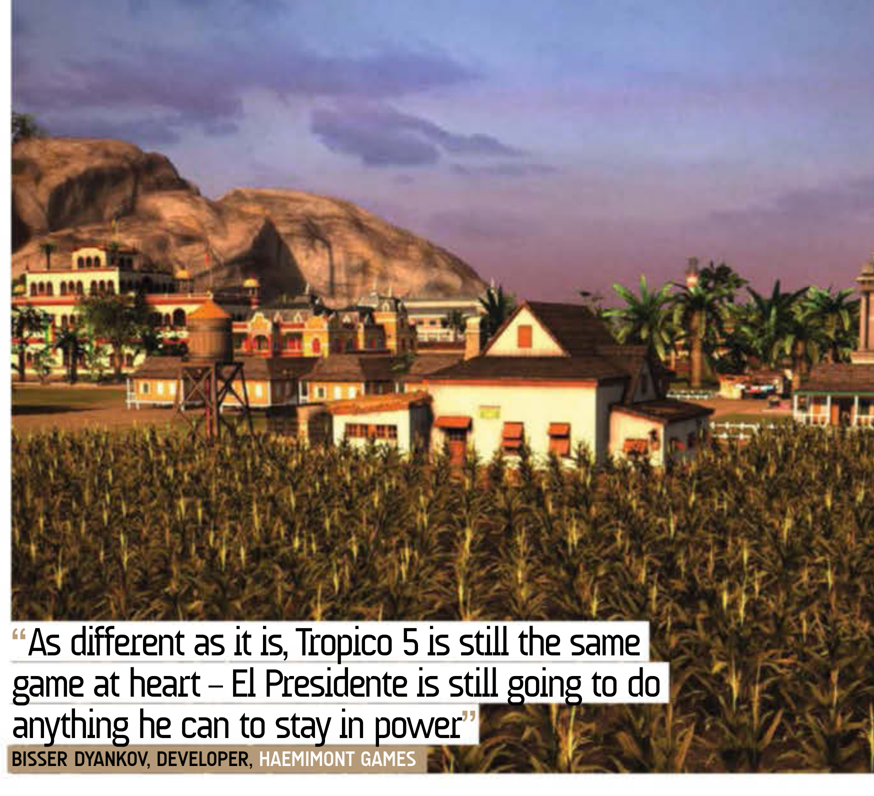
"Older *Tropico* was static," veteran developer Bisser Dyankov tells us after we sat down with him for a playthrough of *Tropico 5*, "Once the player learned 10 or 20 tricks, they could get through the game without a problem. In *Tropico 5*, we wanted to make it less simple." This shows: in the gameplay that we saw in the form of a scripted presentation, many things went wrong. We liked that; it showed how much *Tropico 5* could throw at you, and how adaptable you have to be to work through the game. Unlike its predecessors, *Tropico 5* will run through different gameplay objectives – as the time changes, so do your duties. It's becoming more and more like a dictator simulator, and that's good, because there's nothing else on the market that does that. *Tropico 5* is a game that promises to "streamline the micromanagement process," according to Dyankov, but it does so much more than that – in fact, *Tropico 5* almost reinvents the series by introducing many more features:

1 IT KEEPS IT IN THE FAMILY

Tropico 5 introduces a 'Dynasty' mechanic that lets you raise a playable family of evil dictators that can take over your regime when you eventually kick the bucket. You've got to be careful, though – your family could be seen as a weakness to your enemies – "your kids might die because of your actions," explains Dyankov, "or they might go and join the pirates (a very son-of-El Presidente thing to do) or your grandkids might have to deal with the Cuban Missile Crisis". Each individual character has perks, too, that affect how their rule is received.



3



"As different as it is, Tropico 5 is still the same game at heart – El Presidente is still going to do anything he can to stay in power"
BISSER DYANKOV, DEVELOPER, HAEMIMONT GAMES

2 IT BEGINS DURING COLONIAL TIMES

Tropico 5 will feature a series of different eras to play through – from Colonial times where you're appointed Governor of the titular island of Tropico to your gaining of independence, the World War era and then finally the 21st century. Each era will offer different challenges – at first, you'll want to set up a busy economy/export based society, but when the World Wars start, you'll want to align yourself with Allied/Axis forces. The modern era might see you set up a tropical resort, build up an army, etc…

3 IT DOESN'T FOCUS ON COMBAT

While there will be conflict in the game – pirates coming to raid your shores, rebels rising up against your regime, aggressive indigenous tribes and so on – Haemimont is keen to keep the focus on management and construction. "We don't want to push *Tropico* into being a real-time strategy game," Dyankov told us. "We're making the most politically incorrect world-builder we can, where [the focus] is your embezzling the economy of your own country to serve your own ends. We want to keep the combat simulation light."

4 IT'S MULTIPLAYER!

Tropico 5 is the first game in the series to get full multiplayer integration – on your island, players have the option to set up multiple cities for up to four different players. Depending on your playstyle, you can play co-operatively or competitively. The title will feature an exploration element that will "come to life in multiplayer", according to Dyankov. We like this idea – the thought of one person working on the economy, one building an army and one securing votes seems difficult to organise, but would be incredibly satisfying to pull off.

5 IT RETAINS ITS DARK SENSE OF HUMOUR

We must have laughed out loud at least five times in the section we played – the *Tropico* sense of humour is still present, and still as satirical and biting as ever. In fact, the humour is more in keeping with the first few games – more subtle, more relevant. Better yet, the loading screen is populated with little facts about (in)famous dictators that serve to inform, and can give you ideas about how to play yourself. *Tropico 5* seems like it'll give players the opportunity to be as amoral and anarchistic as they please. Very appealing.





SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

SUPER SMASH BROS

Format: **Wii U, 3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house, Bandai Namco**
ETA: **2014**



THE IMPRESSIVE series of Nintendo Direct videos has so far been a resounding success for the company, which took to the platform again to offer an incremental update on the upcoming Wii U and 3DS *Super Smash Bros.* sequel. Little Mac of *Punch-Out!!* fame is the latest character to join the roster of fighters, ticking all the boxes: a classic Nintendo icon, aesthetically well suited and perfectly equipped to square off against Mario and co.

NINTENDO POCKET FOOTBALL CLUB

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **17 April**



ALREADY RELEASED in Japan as *Pocket Soccer League: Calciobit* in 2012, Nintendo has announced that *Nintendo Pocket Football Club* will be arriving in April this year. Demoed in the recent Nintendo Direct, you take control of your own football club in this pixel-art football management sim. It's not the intense level of *Football Manager*'s po-faced, colourful spreadsheet, but it offers depth and customisable options, from team emblems to player tactics.

BATMAN: ARKHAM ORIGINS BLACKGATE

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Warner Bros**
Developer: **Armature Studio**
ETA: **2 April**



AS IS often the case with a lot of quality software overlooked on handheld systems, last year's *Batman: Arkham Origins Blackgate* is now getting an HD spruce-up for a console release in the coming few weeks. Previously released on Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation Vita, it's more or less the same experience bolstered with an enhanced map and hint system – which is a pretty handy addition given the Metroidvania approach to level design.

BAYONETTA 2

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Platinum Games**
ETA: **2014**



THE MORE we see of *Bayonetta 2* the more we're convinced it could be the Wii U's killer app. Platinum Games has been showing off more about what the '2' in the title stands for: primarily taking the original's gameplay and characters and massively expanding them. That starts with the new feature called Umbran Climax. Now saving your Magic Gauge lets you unleash a combo made of Wicked Weave and Infernal Demon summons.

MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2015**



RELEASED AT the tail-end of last year in Japan after massive delays (it was meant to launch in March 2013), *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* is moving closer to a Western release. Although, gamers will have to wait longer before it reaches international shores. Nintendo has confirmed that Capcom's monster franchise will arrive on 3DS in 2015 but we'd bet on an early release before the end of the fiscal year.

PRODIGY

Format: **TBC**
Publisher: **Hanakai Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **8 April**



PITCHED AS *Skylanders/Disney Infinity* for adults, fresh start-up Hanakai Studio's inaugural title combines high-quality figurines (designed by world-renowned figurine modeller Jean Bey) with videogames. It's not a new concept, but a relatively untested one in an adult genre. The biggest challenge the studio must overcome is creating an immersive, tactical RPG with a series of figurines that don't feel superfluous.

DAYLIGHT

Format: **PC, PS4**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **Zombie Studios**
ETA: **Early 2014**



WHILE ZOMBIE Studios' first-person fright-fest *Daylight* wasn't available to review before going to print, its release is around the corner. The studio has been ramping up the publicity machine and revealed an intriguing community interactive feature. Using Twitch chat, players can cue in-game events to scare other players – for instance, type 'meow' into chat and the game will play a cat sound effect.

SACRED 3

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Deep Silver**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **Summer 2014**



DEEP SILVER has announced the latest in its hack-and-slash series of co-operative combat games, *Sacred 3*, will be arriving later in the year. The studio has been focusing development on creating a more robust drop-in, dro-out co-operative multiplayer experience for both offline (which supports two players) and online (supporting four). Expect to hear more about the sequel in the coming months.



DELAYED – Shin Megami Tensei IV (3DS)

There is still no word on the European release date, despite the fact it was promised to arrive last summer. But now Sega owns Atlus, it is likely that we can expect the release date to come a little sooner.



DELAYED – Octodad: Dadliest Catch (PS4)

One of the big indie releases touted for Sony's new console, *Octodad*'s PlayStation debut has been pushed back slightly to April. Developer Young Horses is also considering bringing the game to Xbox One.

TRANSFORMERS: RISE OF THE DARK SPARK

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **TBC**
ETA: **2014**



THE FIRST next-gen *Transformers* game has been announced and *Rise Of The Dark Spark* is the videogame 'complement' to Michael Bay's next cinematic migraine due this summer. Ambitiously, it's attempting to merge the movie canon with the narrative from in the recent series of *Cybertron* games. Activision hasn't stated which developer will be working on the sequel, but it doesn't seem to be High Moon Studios, who developed the last three entries.

THE EVIL WITHIN

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Bethesda**
Developer: **Tango Gameworks**
ETA: **29 August**



SHINJI MIKAMI'S eagerly-anticipated return to the survival horror genre isn't far away, with Bethesda confirming *The Evil Within* will be released on 29 August. That's across current and next-gen systems, as well as a PC release. Be sure to write the date in your diary and check back around June when we're sure that there will be a massive blowout of information. From what we've seen, *The Evil Within* is a chilling experience, with Mikami on top form.

A STORY ABOUT MY UNCLE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Coffee Stain Studios**
Developer: **Gone North Games**
ETA: **Summer 2014**



GARNERING ALL sorts of awards a couple of years back, *A Story About My Uncle* was a student project that has since evolved into a fully fleshed first-person puzzle adventure. The concept is a little reminiscent of Kim Swift's *Quantum Conundrum*: a kid utilising an invention of his mad inventor uncle's to manipulate gravity and manoeuvre through a strange world solving puzzles. Coffee Stain Studios will publish the game later in the year.

X

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Monolith Soft**
ETA: **2014**



XENOBLADE CHRONICLES developer Monolith Soft has released a gameplay video of its tentatively titled action-RPG *X*, set to debut on Wii U later this year. We see how the battle system will work, as well as how a skirmish escalates when a player enters a 'Doll' – the mechs that can fly, traverse water and transform into vehicles. It doesn't look unlike *Xenoblade*, which isn't a bad thing, and *X* will have a similar emphasis on exploration too.

CHROMA

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Harmonix**
Developer: **In-house, Hidden Path Entertainment**
ETA: **2014**



DANCE CENTRAL and *Rock Band* developer Harmonix is turning its attention to the first-person shooter genre in its upcoming free-to-play title *Chroma*. Teaming up with Hidden Path Entertainment, sound plays an integral part in the combat system, with maintaining a rhythm vital in taking out your enemies. A closed alpha has begun and the game will launch on Steam Early Access later in the year.

MIGHTY NO. 9

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **TBC**
Developer: **Comcept, Inti Creates**
ETA: **April 2015**



KEIJI INAFUNE has released a bunch of new information about his upcoming spiritual sequel to *Mega Man*, *Mighty No. 9*. The developer posted a video online of himself playing the game, which looks like it's evoking the spirit of his classic Capcom creation, but featuring more dynamic animations. The game is being adapted into a live-action television series by the studio behind *Mortal Kombat: Legacy*.

NES REMIX 2

Format: **3DS**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **25 April**



FOLLOWING THE success of its previous *NES Remix*, which saw a bunch of iconic Nintendo properties rejigged and crossover in a series of *WarioWare*-style micro-games, Nintendo has announced that a sequel will arrive at the end of April. It's not a surprise given a few strange franchise omissions in the original. Still, the original was a great timewaster and the sequel will no doubt prove equally so.

THE ESCAPISTS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Team17**
Developer: **Mouldy Toof Studios**
ETA: **2014**



KICKSTARTER SUCCESS story *The Escapists* has found itself a publisher in Team17, the company behind *Worms*. Developed by Mouldy Toof (the maker of *Spud's Quest*), *The Escapists* is a prison break game pitched as a cross between *Terraria* and *Minecraft*, involving crafting, digging, and other activities vital for your escape. We wouldn't be surprised to see it leap onto consoles after its initial PC debut.



WHY I ♥...

Smash TV

MIKAEL HAVERI, HOUSEMARQUE

'Co-op slaughterfest with a sense of humour.' That describes the hook that was central to Smash TV *and* Super Smash TV*. Starting the game you felt like you were on a TV show. That level of immersion was fresh to the arcade kids of that era, still dreaming about the future of gaming. The funny commentator spewing then relevant TV references to make light of a pretty gruesome setting was over the top, but created a great setting that made it feel more real than* Robotron *ever could. Controls that were implemented perfectly for the twin-stick arcade and worked well even on SNES. On top of all this, it was pure bliss when you got to play it with a friend. After a few sessions of co-op,* Smash TV *became the two-player experience and single-player just wouldn't cut it any more. All in all, the game captures a lot of the values we try to uphold, like precision gameplay and simplicity in design – a true lesson Housemarque keeps going back to.*



"It was pure bliss when you got to play it with a friend… single-player just wouldn't cut it anymore"

MIKAEL HAVERI, HOUSEMARQUE



THE GAME OF

WATCHED BY MILLIONS AND PLAYED BY MANY MILLIONS MORE, LEAGUE OF LEGENDS HAS ALMOST TRANSCENDED GAMING TO BECOME A FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT IN ITS OWN RIGHT. HOW DID IT HAPPEN AND WHERE MIGHT IT LEAD? **GAMES™** SPEAKS TO RIOT GAMES TO FIND OUT



CHAMPIONS

There are two types of gamer in the world: those who play *League Of Legends* on a regular basis and those who may be shocked to find out just how many of the other type there are. That number, in case you suspect yourself among the latter, currently stands at 67 million, with untold millions more just happy to watch others play. By our reckoning that's more than *Minecraft*, or any other videogame you'd care to mention. If you had to house every *League Of Legends* player at short notice, you'd need to stuff at least three of them in every hotel room the world has to offer, assuming of course that it's a quiet mid-week and none are already booked up. Or you could evacuate the entirety of France and shove them all there, although there'd still be a »


Gaming commentary has come a long way since the 1995 UK Doom Championships.


SK Telecom T1 are naturally pleased to the lift the Championship trophy stuffed with cash.

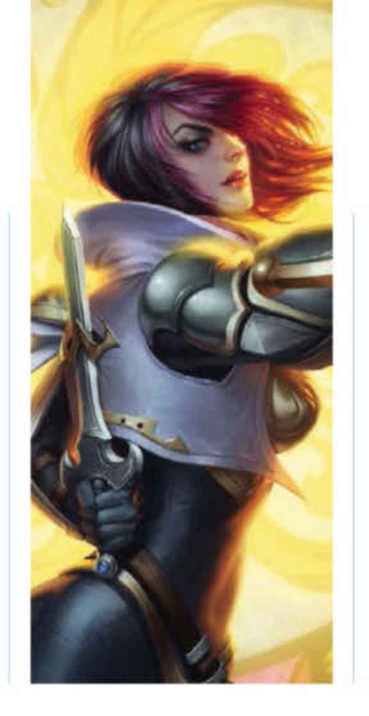



Watching high level games live is easily done via the game client.

few million unable to find a bed for the night and you'd still have to find somewhere for the French to hang out. In short, there are a lot of *LOL* players. More than there are French people, at least.

Where did they all come from and how did they manage to multiply so quickly? (*LOL* players, not the French.) For Kristoffer Touborg, a long-time *League Of Legends* fan and programs manager at Riot Games, the answer is very simple – people flock to fun games. "There's always a tendency to try to rationalise after you launch a game and try and break down the components of why it's successful, but I think that at the end of the day *League Of Legends* is inherently really, really satisfying to play. Obviously there's a bunch of really good components around it like the social stuff and all the esports and all that, but I think *League Of Legends* is a really gratifying and fun game."

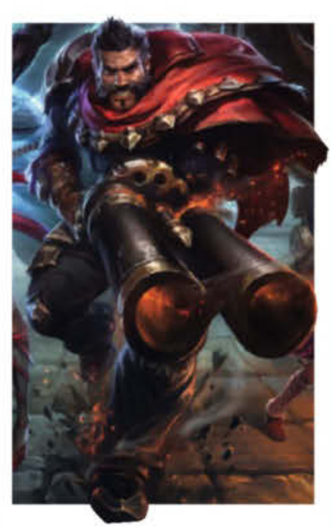
He does have a point. *League Of Legends is* fun, although the stuff Touborg casually dismisses as 'all that' is perhaps worth mentioning; such as the ubiquity of modest PCs and the low system requirements necessary to play, not to mention that the game is free to download and access, relatively easy to play and rather more compelling to watch than most team shooters. Like



all current gaming phenomena (which is to say *Minecraft*), *League Of Legends* launched its bid at world domination in 2009, but the foundations for its future success were laid down many years previously with the release of a custom player-created map for *Starcraft* called *Aeon Of Strife*. Eschewing the resource-gathering and base-building elements common to real-time strategy games at the time, *Strife* gave each player a single unit to fight with, more in line with an action game but without the direct controls. NPC minions would creep across the map in a manner since established in hundreds of tower defence games, and the aim was to fight past them to destroy the enemy base. It wasn't until the concept was further refined a few years later for a *Warcraft III* map called *Defense Of The Ancients* that the new genre would be properly christened.

Inevitably the creators of *DOTA* and it's many variants moved between projects, as modders and map makers often do, but the popularity of their efforts was such that it wasn't long before the more enterprising members of the community saw an opportunity to develop a standalone game. So it was that Riot Games was established in 2006, quickly signing up the creator of *DOTA: Allstars*, then established as the

"A LOT OF US HAVE OUR BACKGROUNDS IN THE OLD SCHOOL MOBAS"


This is how you make a pair of binoculars look threatening.

THE EVOLUTION OF THE MOBA

FUTURE COP: LAPD 1998



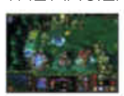
Initially intended as a sci-fi continuation of the *Strike* series of games (*Desert*, *Jungle*, *Urban* etc), *Future Cop* is a barely-remembered mech action game. However the developer of *Aeon Of Strife* was a fan and cites it as a direct influence.

AEON OF STRIFE 1999



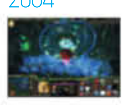
Much of the DNA of the *DOTA*-style that *League Of Legends* and other games have built upon was established via the *Starcraft* user-made map *Aeon Of Strife*. Four players team up on one side of the map with NPC creeps approaching down lanes towards them. A later version offered 2v2 multiplayer.

DEFENSE OF THE ANCIENTS 2002



Upon the release of *Warcraft III*, *Aeon Of Strife* was ported over, before being improved upon, first by a map called *Valley Of Dissent*, then *Defense Of The Ancients*, the latter of which quickly became one of the most played maps on the entirely of Battle.net.

DOTA: ALLSTARS 2004

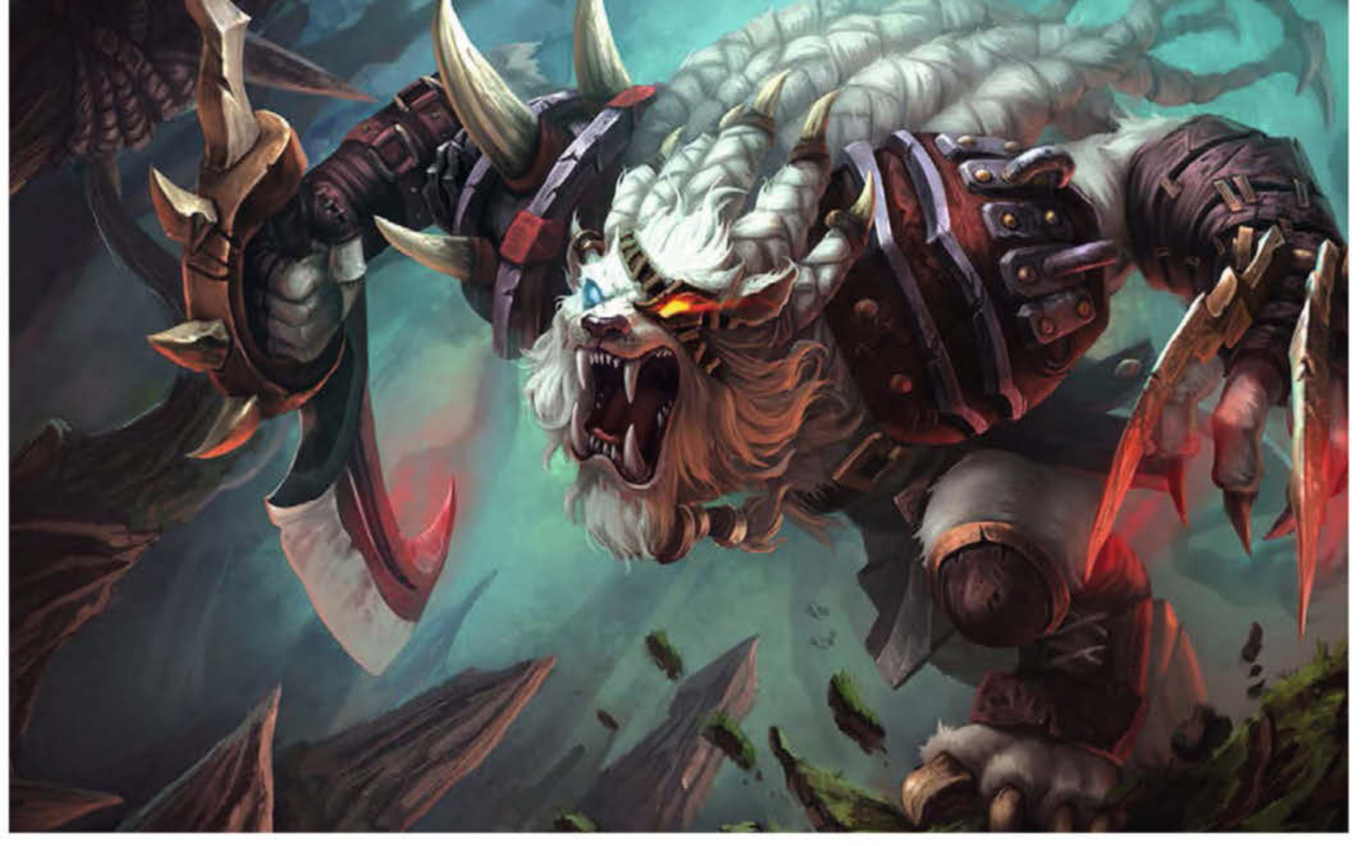


All manner of *DOTA*-styled maps and mods started appearing for *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne*, each with different heroes. *DOTA: Allstars* was in part a compilation of many of them, based on the original *DOTA* map. Successive *Allstars* modders would go on to Riot and Valve to establish commercial versions.

DEMIGOD 2009



Given the popularity of *DOTA* it was inevitable that a commercial title would enter development. The first to the shelves was Gas Powered Games' Demigod. Praised for its presentation, the game was released before the servers were open rendering the game unplayable. Next would come *League Of Legends*...



■ *League Of Legends* is being hounded by Valve's *Dota 2* and Blizzard's *Heroes Of The Storm*.



■ You would be pleased yourself if you'd just won yourself a million dollars.



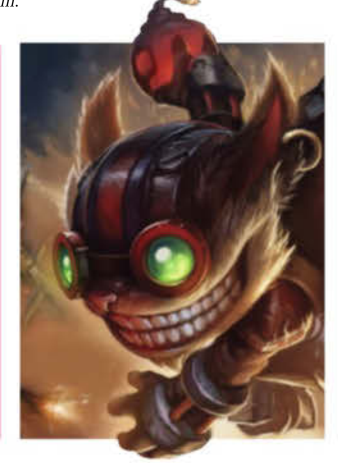
■ There are veteran rock bands that would struggle to fill the Staples Center.



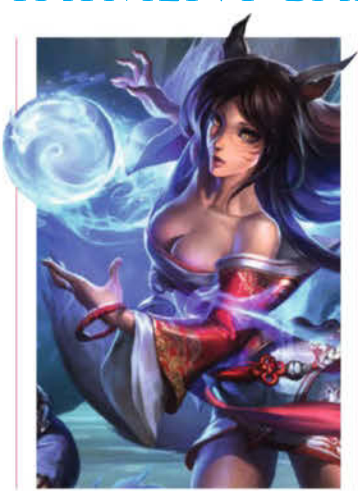
■ Fans applaud the Lionel Messi of *League Of Legends*.

de facto *Defense Of The Ancients* experience, to design a commercial successor and take *DOTA*-style gaming to the big leagues.

"A lot of us – even the founders – have our backgrounds in the old school MOBAs and playing our way through them," says Touborg. "I think that's the way it is for a lot of genres; there are a few grassroots attempts and a few kind-of background games and then you see one big one that breaks through." Although Gas Powered Games was the first to market with its *DOTA*-inspired *Demigod* early in 2009, it garnered attention for mostly the wrong reasons; poor multiplayer performance chief among them. In hindsight however it was perhaps the game's high barrier to entry in terms of system requirements and cover price that were just as damaging. Meanwhile, having watched the inexorable rise of free-to-play spread from Asia, Riot saw the benefits of microtransactions, recognising that the more players you could attract (by offering a free client), the more competitive the game would become by sheer weight of numbers. The difficulty was in deciding what players could expect to access for free, and what features would require financial investment to keep the servers running and shareholders happy. In the end Riot opted for a revenue system that allowed full access to the game and the rotation of all the game's 100-plus characters, with microtransaction necessary only to unlock cosmetic and convenience items. As a result Riot was roundly considered to be one of the few developers to get F2P right. "I think that all credit is due to the original team here that they got a formula together that was just really, really good," says Touborg. "The key for us has been that we want to make a really good game and not really think about payment barriers and stuff like that. [We just] hope that the players will like us enough to pay us every now and then."



"WE WANT TO MAKE A REALLY GOOD GAME AND NOT THINK ABOUT PAYMENT BARRIERS"



Clearly the players do have plenty of appreciation for what Riot is doing. In 2013, *League Of Legends* made $624m in revenue, the third highest in the free-to-play rankings after Korean titles *Dungeon&Fighter* and *Crossfire* and way ahead of *World Of Tanks* »

TALK ESPORT

RIOT'S KRISTOFFER TOUBORG ON THE ESPORTING SPECIFICS

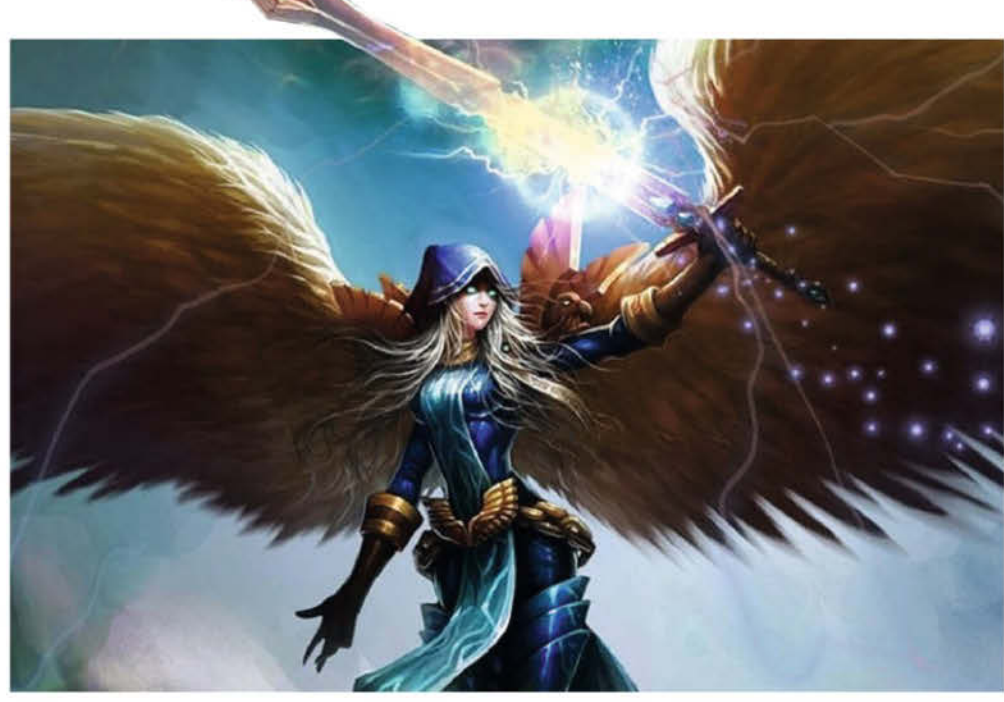
Who is the top player?
There's a Korean team called SK Telecom T1 that has a mid laner called Faker who is a talent above everyone else and someone who has the entire toolkit of natural ability, physical speed and everything else. I think that really resonates in most competitive games, but maybe it's kind of amplified by the fact that we have such a gigantic pool of players. If you have a lot of players playing the game obviously the top level talent are absolutely extraordinary people that are unique and should really be regarded the same as top athletes outside of gaming.

So Faker's the Lionel Messi of *LOL*?
I think Lionel Messi is the Faker of football.

Do you see players transferring?
I think we're starting to see it. We had a Danish player called Bjergsen transfer from the EULCS to the NALCS and I think that was the first transatlantic transfer. I expect more of them to pop up and I say that this will very likely grow and just take on a lot of shapes we see from regular sports.

The US immigration authorities recognise *LOL* pros as athletes. Doesn't that strike you as absurd?
I think it would be absurd if they weren't recognised as athletes. They might not be running around on a pitch, but the hours they practice every day are much more rigorous that most other pros, so I don't see any reason why they wouldn't be recognised as athletes. They're tremendous people. They have gigantic pools of talent and put a lot of hard work into it, so the fact that they are recognised I only think is fair and I think it would be odd if they weren't.

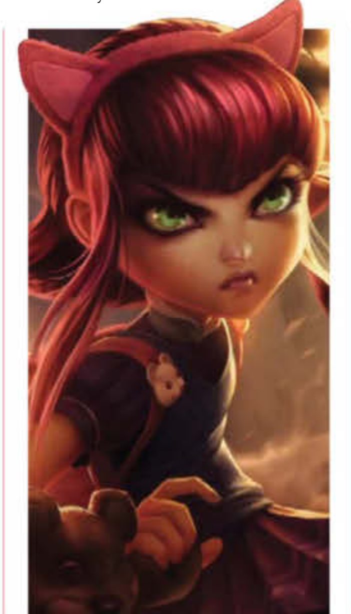
Do you see the wider recognition of eSports as inevitable?
Obviously we're not the only ones doing eSports and I think the industry as a whole is doing tremendous work to get it recognised. I think we will inevitably have eOlympics and stuff like that. I think though that the biggest issue that we suffer from, and that Riot has solved fairly well is a stable pro environment. I wish more leagues would make sure that there are good contracts, good rules in place and have a more structured approach. We've very much taken it in house and it's paid off and I'm really hoping that a lot of people will copy that and we can get more of these stable really big leagues.


Riot makes the bulk of its in-game revenue from vanity items.

and *Team Fortress 2*. For a game that is among the most generous in terms of access, $624m is a very respectable haul.

AS WITH MANY successful games, *League Of Legends*' rise has been largely a case of being the right game in the right place at the right time, not just in terms of genre and revenue model, but in terms of both developers and players being able to take advantage of a rapidly evolving online infrastructure. Just as YouTube has been integral to the success of *Minecraft*, so live streaming services like Twitch have been pivotal to spreading the *League Of Legends* playbook.

"The ability to share the game with your friends is truly important," says Touborg. "Just being able to interact with *League Of Legends* as a hobby rather than just a piece of software where you play I think is fantastic and our players' ability to share experiences through stuff like Twitch is tremendous." The ability for veteran and professional player to showcase their talent, fostering a climate of aspiration that is open and interactive is one of the more unique aspects of Riot's success. Touborg was recently inspired to watch a tournament between *League Of Legends* players from Oxford and Cambridge universities and was struck by how compelling it was.



"Oxford and Cambridge is in terms of identity obviously a gigantic battle, but in terms of skill, they're good but they're not championship good. So I'm sitting there and I'm watching it and even though it wasn't pro level I was really enjoying it. There are a few reasons for that: I think the level of shoutcasting and commentary have become great. It's not some guy sitting at home on a bad internet connection, it's a full studio. I also think that the tournament viewing experience has also become really good. It's a very easy game to follow. Obviously we're not quite at the level of football where you constantly see the pitch and track what's going on, but it is very easy to get a grasp and I think that's part of what makes *League Of Legends* so good to watch."

> "THE ABILITY TO SHARE EXPERIENCES IS TREMENDOUS"


New Champions are regularly added to the *League Of Legends* roster.

Undoubtedly significant to *League Of Legends*' success is how fully its gameplay systems and community is geared around competitive play and esports, from the casual unranked matches to

continent-wide tournaments like the European and North American League Championship Series, OGN The Champions (Korea), Legends Pro League (China) and the Garena Premier League (SE Asia) – all of which feed teams to the annual World Championships. Just to illustrate how big the League Of Legends World Championships are, the last one was held LA's Staple Center, the same venue that has hosted NHL Stanley Cup finals, WWE SummerSlam, NBA finals and the Grammy Awards. So popular was the event that 32 million people watched online as Korean team SK Telecom T1 took the $1m prize.

"We have a really good pro level thing going," says Touborg. "The League Championship Series is really watchable and we have pros that make money – actually quite a lot of money these days. But I think there is a grass roots level where we can do a lot more. We have so many players who would love to play in a tournament if there was one available." Currently Touborg is trying to establish a university league system across the UK and Europe, the logic behind it being that competitors and spectators might feel more invested in a team if it's one they can identify with or more easily join. "Down the road I'd be disappointed if there wasn't an annual university league and I think that's really the interesting layer we're going to try and tackle. We're going to look at some kind of national-style tournaments where everyone can compete."





It's hard to doubt *League Of Legends*' credentials as a spectator eSport.





1	LEAGUE OF LEGENDS $10,383,789 ■203	6	WARCRAFT III $2,829,657 ■519
2	STARCRAFT II $10,360,956 ■1263	7	HALO 3 $1,689,476 ■19
3	DOTA 2 $8,534,602 ■150	8	CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS II $1,341,905 ■19
4	COUNTER-STRIKE $8,383,789 ■282	9	HALO 2 $1,314,175 ■55
5	STARCRAFT: BROOD WAR $5,211,876 ■163	10	C-S: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE $1,130,673 ■79

SOURCE: ESPORTSEARNINGS.COM

KEEP ON WATCHING

More and more of us are watching TV online rather than traditional broadcast television, and in the case of *League Of Legends*, it's not just the most-watched game, it's the most watched *anything*

- **League Of Legends Season 3 World Championship** October 2013 — 8.5M
- **Red Bull Stratos** October 2012 — 8.0M
- **Curiosity Mars landing** August 2012 — 3.2M
- **League Of Legends Season 2 World Championship** October 2012 — 1.1M
- **The International 2013 DOTA 2 Championship** August 2013 — 1.0M
- **NFL Superbowl XLVIII** February 2014 — 0.5M
- **London Olympics** July 2012 — 0.5M
- **Royal Wedding** April 2011 — 0.3M



PRIOR TO JOINING Riot, Touborg was the lead designer of *Eve Online*, a vastly different game from *League Of Legends* as most would recognise, with players of the long-running sci-fi universe more used to using foul means than fair to get the upper hand. Since consigning CCP Games to his CV however, Touborg has come to realise that the two games have an equally strong and creative player infrastructure that has been integral to the games' longevity.

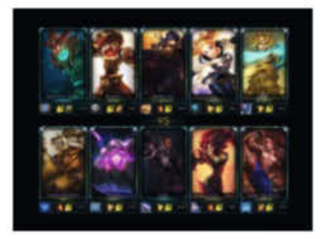
"People would be very surprised at just how similar they are community-wise," he says. "*Eve* is very much about the grassroots and I think for *League Of Legends* that's actually the case as well. Obviously both games have a client and a game that people log in and enjoy, but all the stuff the players do around the game is really amazing." For *Eve*, there are countless tools, apps, information and news sites that are as necessary a part of the game as the client itself, but it's arguably the strong social structures that players have created and maintained that give *Eve* its depth and intricacy, with the borders of thousands-strong alliances ebbing and flowing like waves on a beach. *League Of Legends* players have created much the same social structures, only the playing fields on which they come together are considerably more level.

If there's one area in which *League Of Legends* players have sometimes earned themselves a reputation, it's for sometimes being hostile or unforgiving towards new players who might be unfamiliar with the ways of the game. "I think that there's a natural element in any team sport of people needing to communicate and sometimes that's good and bad," admits Touborg "but I don't feel like there's any more or less of that than in any other game. In fact I think there are some really good and solid people in our community that are good at picking people up. In fact I think that the fact that we've grown the game is a testament to how accessible our game is and we do a lot for it, right. We probably have more resources put into ensuring fair play and good player behaviour than most other companies." »

■ *League Of Legends* is now bigger than *Starcraft* in South Korea.



■ *League of Legends*' accessibility has been central to Riot's success.

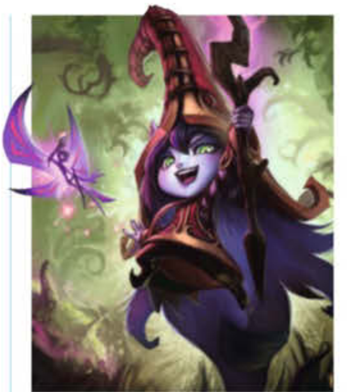


■ All the game's Champions are accessible, although Riot rotate their availability every week.



■ Tens of thousands attend live *LOL* tournaments in the US and Asia.

» One way that Riot ensures fairness is through an elected player council called the Tribunal, which in some ways similar to *Eve*'s Council of Stellar Management. If reported by another player for any kind of bad behaviour, the Tribunal will review the evidence and pass judgment accordingly.

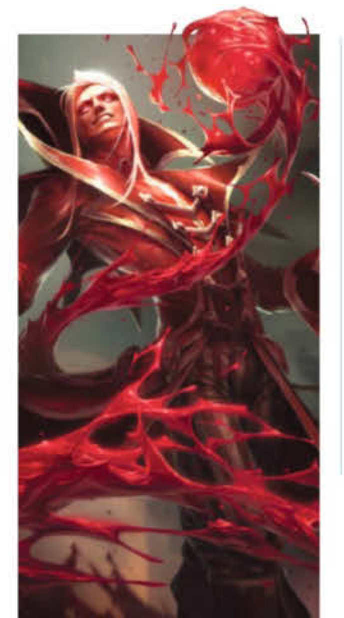


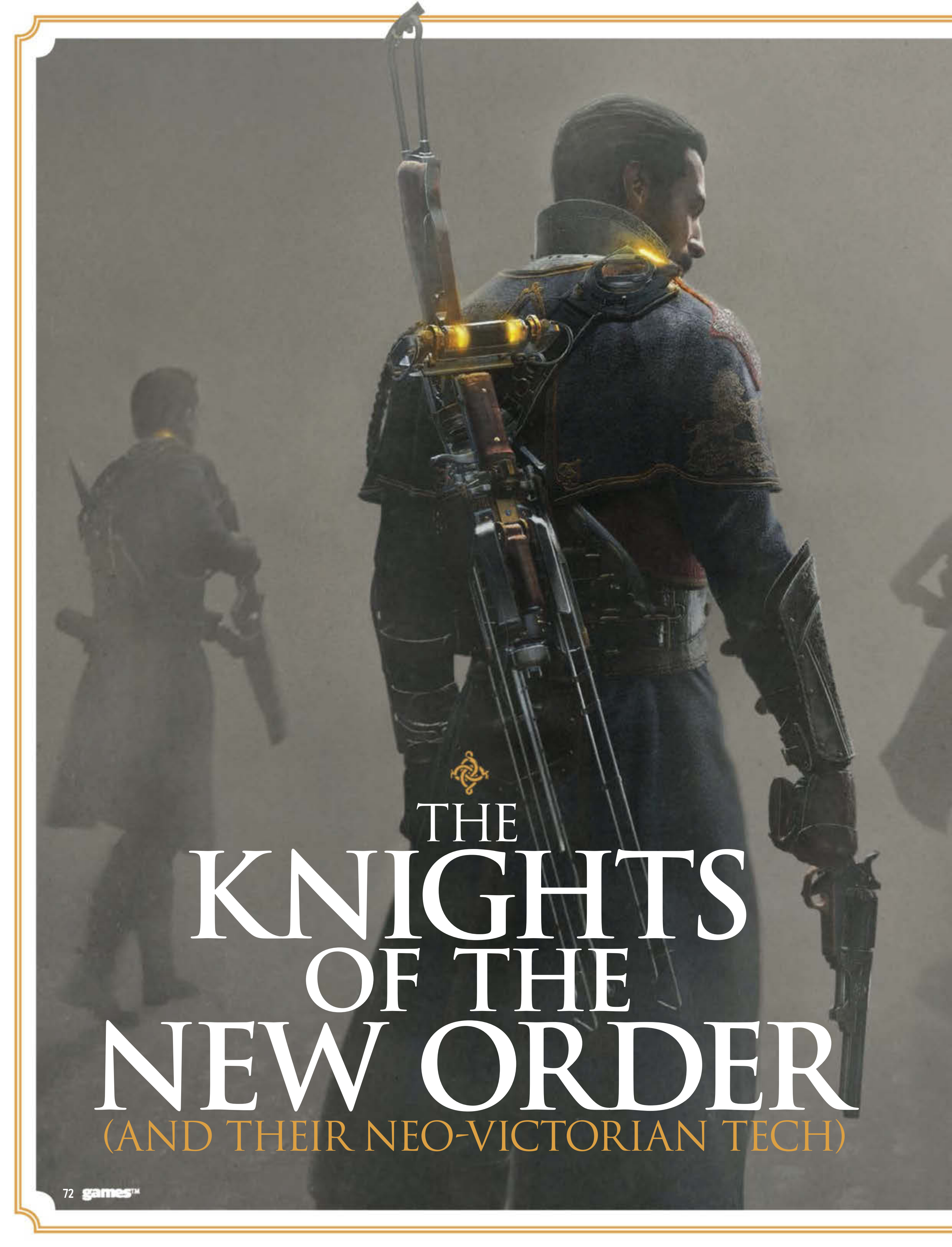
WITH PLANS FOR new league systems that plan to drill down into the vast untapped reservoir of *League Of Legends* players, plus a fourth championship season underway ahead of a world finals tournament due to be held in Seoul later in the year – likely to break viewing records yet again – the rise of *League Of Legends* shows no signs of slowing down. Plenty of games are snapping at its heals, not least of them Valve's *Dota 2*, however with Blizzard soon to join the fray with its own take on the *DOTA* formula, *Heroes Of The Storm* (previously known as *Blizzard All-Stars*), clearly there are challenging times ahead. Blizzard may be joining the party late, but with a ready-made audience of *World Of Warcraft* fans that's already established across the world, an almighty clash of *DOTA*-inspired titans is inevitable. Perhaps Riot might find an advantage in trying to conquer next-gen consoles, after all we've seen a number of free-to-play games make the transition from PC and it's not as if there's a great deal of pre-existing competition.



Touborg, normally effusive and verbose, falls uncharacteristically silent: "I don't have a clue," he says when asked about the possibility of a *League Of Legends* console client. "Even if I could answer that, I wouldn't… I don't know." Could it work, we ask, sensing a future announcement? "I haven't given it much thought," he says. "We're on PC right now and it's been a really good platform for us to work on, so I wouldn't know." If not console, how else might Riot ensure the phenomenal growth of *League Of Legends*? Between last October and January the number of active users doubled. That number again: 67 million, more than 7m of which are almost certainly playing right now.

"We're not really a numbers or a revenue-driven company. I don't really know what this company makes and I'm not really sure how many people play the game. Our focus is very different than some goal like that."





THE KNIGHTS OF THE NEW ORDER

(AND THEIR NEO-VICTORIAN TECH)



In any console war, a battle is waged for exclusives. Since neither Microsoft nor Sony has managed to secure a true first-party killer app so far, all eyes fall on future titles to see what the platform holders can really do with their own consoles. And with two God Of War teams collaborating on one new IP, The Order: 1886 is the closest thing we've seen to a proper PS4 must-have, but can a 19th Century cover shooter convince? Ready At Dawn creative director Ru Weerasuriya seems to think so…

As clear and impressive as this new generation's leap in power over the last may be, the one constant criticism of both new consoles is that neither really has the first party support to properly showcase it just yet. *Killzone* offered the usual graphical showcase but offered little beyond that to keep players interested; *Forza* further refined the franchise's clinical presentation and handling model yet found itself outperformed in terms of content by its 360 predecessors; *Knack* was… well, it was *Knack*. Nearly six months on, we finally have the first big showdown as serial B-tier open world adventure *InFamous* steps up to bat against moneyhatted *COD* pretender *Titanfall*, but it still all feels like the undercard to a much bigger main event. *Halo* is a TV show now and *Uncharted* apparently still nothing beyond that borderline pointless teaser trailer, so where are all the big first-party titles?

The simple, if somewhat disheartening answer is 'nowhere'. *GT6* is several patches away from matching its forerunner on PS3, let alone making the leap to PS4, while *Gears Of War* isn't the surefire hit it once was after *Judgment* bombed hard and Epic poster boy Cliff Bleszinski jumped ship to work in a bar. The last generation's protracted length hurt many a franchise in similar way, actually – *God Of War*, *Fable*, *Gears* and »

Environments are insanely detailed, brought to life by realistic minutia and other characters just going about their business.

arguably even *Uncharted* all ended up going one game too many and bottoming out, meaning the only way forward for Sony and Microsoft now is to branch out and explore new territories. Kudos to Sony, then, for spotting this and tasking two of its most talented teams with making a 19th Century cover shooter that people might actually get excited about and, more importantly, actually want to buy and play.

We could explain the premise of *The Order: 1886* at this point, but it's far better to let the visionaries behind the project do the talking. "*The Order* is an ancient order of knights, basically. They were first setup to protect humanity," explains Ready At Dawn's creative director Ru Weerasuriya. "More than a millennia ago, there was a split in humanity that causes one side to go on as humans and the other side to eventually become half-breeds. The half-breeds start to wage war with the humans for the usual ideas of control, dominion, supremacy and survival. Neither side backs down and an all-out war breaks out between humans and half-breeds. It's not until the industrial revolution that humans build the weapons capable of taking the war to the half-breeds."

It's here that the history branches off from the one you might read in textbooks or on a wiki, with hundreds of years of war meaning that the industrial revolution proves that much more productive. It's no great secret that technology advances far quicker in times of war but here, ongoing conflict leads to tech at the turn of the 20th Century which actually surpasses much of what we have today. It's closer to *Quake III* than it is to The History Channel – and that's fine, because The History Channel doesn't have railguns – but either way, that's the alternate history timeline the team has laid out. With the humans having discovered a way to extend their lifespans through Black Water (which sounds about as scientific as Wobbly Matter), the ideals and heroes of King Arthur's Round Table are able to last far longer, with each of *The Order*'s primary characters stepping into the role of one of those legendary knights, if one or two elongated generations later.

A tenner says there's an on-rails mounted gun section on the back of a stagecoach.



"The game is certainly Galahad's story," nods Weerasuriya. "It's viewed from his point of view. There are lots of things happening around him, and one of his roles for us is as a vessel for the player to really understand the story and the world. But you do see the evolution of his character throughout the game and throughout the plot." You'd hope for as much, really, as you would with any work of fiction, although few games go to this kind of length to mesh folklore, history, technology and narrative into one coherent whole. *The Order*'s intro is going to need to be something really quite special in order to convey all these different factors – not to mention the insane timeframe of its backstory – especially since Ready At Dawn seems keen for this to be the start of something big rather than just a one-off.

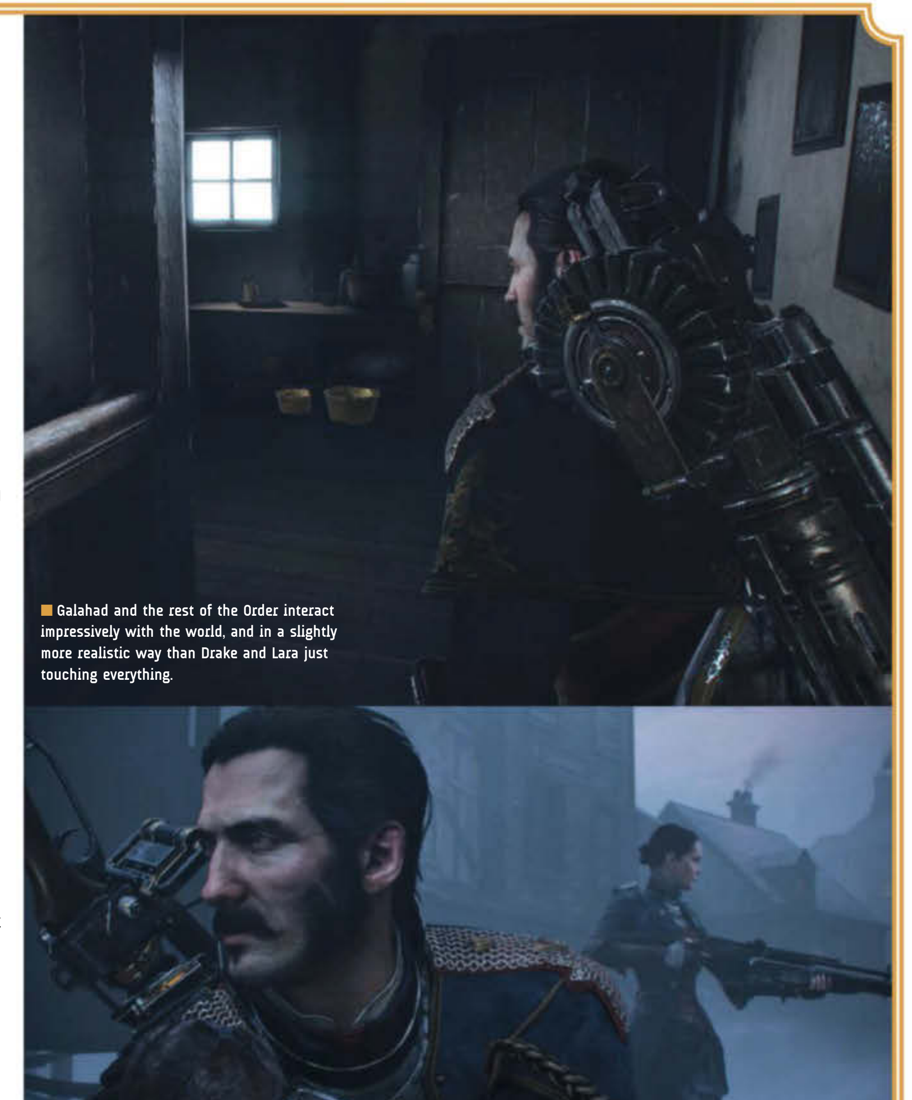
"We've built this IP to be much bigger than just one game," Weerasuriya explains. "There are stories that have been told in the game but there are stories that haven't and stories about what happens after the events of this game. Absolutely, though, I would love to get the chance to tell more stories with sequels and other things we can do with the IP." A little presumptuous perhaps, but you can't fault his enthusiasm, not to mention the fact that this kind of history-bending tomfoolery

will most likely take more explanation than a single game can realistically offer without pulling a *Metal Gear* and shouting for hours on end while you sit patiently with your coffee and wait for your Trophy to pop up.

One interesting aspect of *The Order* is its resolution – while the team will tell you that it runs at 1080p, the cinema-style letterbox borders tell a different story. Still, whatever movie ratio resolution we're actually looking at here, the reduced display area affords Ready At Dawn's tech wizards more than enough leftover power with which to layer on the post-processing effects. It's an interesting approach to a current hot topic, and one we've not really seen so far – the cinematic aspect of the game meant that the team was never bothered about hitting 60fps, instead locking the game at 30 while pulling up those borders to allow for 4xAA and numerous after-effects to make the visuals really sing. As a result, it looks absolutely stunning – slick, smooth and, for want of wearing the word out, incredibly cinematic, the action of *The Order* is something to behold.

"For me, games have an attachment that comes from the interactivity that you have," explains Weerasuriya when we bring up this cinematic approach. "Often, though, graphically we have a tendency to make things too clear and crisp. We adhere to the filmic side of things because we're so used to seeing movies in a way that is different from the real world. Movies depict the real world in a stylised way, even if it's a movie with no special effects. That's because you tend to over-create atmosphere in a lot of ways – like having dust in the air, on a shining light that creates a halo effect. You don't often see that in the real world unless you are in a dusty room. We expect that level of heightened impression from films now, though – that depth of focus you get on certain lenses you use even just in a conversation scene between two characters is something you expect. In games, though, we have a tendency to have both characters presented completely crisply. Sometimes there's a slight blur, but nothing dramatic."

Ready At Dawn's leading creative figure is far quicker to add context and explanation to his team's approach than many we've spoken to, mind. "The reason we adhere to that is that it's interesting to take things that people accept and expect in movies and add those immersive elements to our game," he explains. "The tricky thing about that is trying to make the cinematic presentation translate to gameplay and making those film-like in-game cameras work for interactions – even just getting the focusing right for shooting someone three metres away as well as shooting someone 30 metres away. We've come up with cool ways of making that work thanks to the design director and it really keeps that cinematic feel working throughout."



■ Galahad and the rest of the Order interact impressively with the world, and in a slightly more realistic way than Drake and Lara just touching everything.

■ Character models are stunning, no great surprise given the studio's high pedigree.



Knights On The Town

Meet the cast of heroes who probably don't eat ham and jam and spam a lot...

Grayson (Sir Galahad)



■ The hero of the piece (you can tell, on account of him only having one name) and *The Order*'s sole playable recruit. Grayson is every bit as malleable and impressionable as a lead needs to be, with the added bonus of player interaction shaping his character somewhat as events transpire.

Sebastian Malory (Sir Percival)



■ Grayson's mentor and the only person in the game with a more fabulous moustache (so far, at least), it's likely that Percival will fill the role of Captain Tutorial or, to bring it back to a culturally relevant *Call Of Duty* reference, Sergeant Doorkicker. He's important, sure, but you'll prove yourself to be more so.

Isabeau D'Argyll (Lady Igraine)



■ Youthful yet experienced enough to earn herself a knightly title, Ingraine is Galahad's apprentice but she's equipped with enough knowledge to hold her own and even school him on some subjects. We want to believe that she serves an actual purpose beyond being Galahad's love interest, but we'll see…

Marquis de Lafayette (No Title)



■ The rookie of the group – title or no, he's still going to have to accept that 'understudy' is better than 'nonestudy', on account of the latter not even being a real thing. If there are life lessons to be learned, you can be damn sure that we'll be doing it through this guy, however French he may or may not actually be.

» For all this outside-the-box thinking, you'd be forgiven for pointing out that *The Order* looks to play like any number of other cover shooters on the market already. It does in parts, that much we'll concede, but the interesting bit comes when there are decisions to be made on the fly. You'll likely moan when you hear that these usually take the form of QTEs but these aren't your standard 'X to live, other buttons to die' affair – there's a degree of freedom here to progress the scene as you see fit. Almost like an *LA Noire* crime scene on a deadline, various interactions can be taken – be it subduing a hostile with a handy nearby blade or choking them out with your bare hands -although with the usual emphasis on quick decisions, there's nothing to say that the easiest or most obvious solution will be the best.

"QTEs for us are a way of delivering a different type of emotional experience to the player. They give us the freedom to get much closer to the character and to see things you wouldn't otherwise see through an in-game camera and tell that moment in a much better way," reveals Weerasuriya. "Our QTEs are different because they have branches to them. That means one player could see a moment occur one way, while a second player sees it a different way. Sometimes the result of the QTE itself is also different, but the storyline continues through that. One QTE sequence saw you dealing with one rebel and that was only one path you saw, but in the final game you can choose different paths and see that play out in a different way. That allows players to talk to each other outside of the game and discuss the different things they've seen."

"IT HAS BEEN A VERY TRYING PROCESS ON THE DESIGN SIDE TO GET ALL OF OUR IDEAS TO FIT"

Ah, the *Dark Souls* effect. It's probably not entirely fair to reference a single game when countless others have done this before but in our experience, From Software's punishing RPGs manage to get people talking and sharing stories to a degree that only Bethesda could hope to understand. While Telltale, with *The Walking Dead* and *The Wolf Among Us* to date, has built its primary gameplay mechanic around demanding player choice in emotional situations, it soon became clear that there aren't as many diversions from the stories it wants to tell as it initially seems. Finding that sweet spot is a matter of empowering the player and making their experiences feel unique even though they categorically cannot be, giving them apparently unique stories to tell and personal approaches to pass on based on a finite and binary set of options. Only the best can do this well, though it must be said that *The Order*'s multiple choice QTEs certainly lend themselves to the kind of watercooler 'What did you do?' conversation that helps a game appeal virally way beyond its target demographic.

"We really want people to understand that what we're trying to build are cinematics that are interactive – seamless movement between cinematics and combat, and between combat to movement and into melee and back into cinematics," Weerasuriya explains. "It's that mix, and our pacing of it, that really is the game. That's what we're trying to do differently from what you'd expect from third-person shooter mechanics. It has been a very trying process on the design side to get all of our ideas to fit in this one game we're trying to build. Some ideas work and some don't and there are a lot of things we've had to drop. That allows us to hone in on what we want to do; if we had too many ideas it would feel too diluted. We try all of our ideas very early on to see what works, then we hone in to take it to a point where the core system are understandable and capable of carrying you through the whole gameplay experience."

Peeking mechanic confirmed? It's more likely this is just a cutscene. Sorry.

The question still stands, though – why does this apparently fresh new IP come across as just another cover shooter? For one thing, the genre has changed little since *Gears Of War* set out the framework for the modern third-person shooter years back, with precious few games deviating from that template and fewer still doing anything interesting with it. But here, it's as much a narrative device as it is a gameplay mechanic. "Third-person helped us get the most attachment to the character and to be cinematic," confirms Weerasuriya. "It's very difficult to achieve that in first-person – there are ways of doing it in first-person and making it something so poignant that people will feel immersed, but actually seeing your character go through things is sometimes a necessity to achieve that cinematic feel."

The feel will apparently change too, based on the company you keep. "The gameplay will sometimes be different, depending on who you take on," Weerasuriya tells us. "We want to make sure all of the mechanics fit into the hero's character and the way he plays. Although there will be different ways of playing for different enemies, we do need to overlap them to make sure they make sense. There are mechanics that work

■ Pulling in the borders allows Ready At Dawn to fiddle with some amazing after-effects.

■ It's not just a cover shooter – the team is looking to layer on the human drama as well.

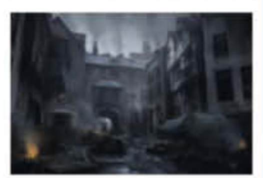
better against humans and those that work better against half-breeds, but you'll see both at the same time in the game."

Such duality sounds like it would lend itself perfectly to a multiplayer component, but Weerasuriya isn't sure this franchise is ready for competition just yet. "We discussed it very early on when we first started working on it," he says. "The reality of it, though, is that to achieve what we want and deliver the message we aim to deliver, especially with this being a new IP, we always felt like it would be great in multiplayer but that we weren't sure it was the right way to introduce an IP. The driving force of this game specifically was to put the IP first. That and the single-player story has to trump everything else and we didn't want the team to be split between two things, because it really does take a whole team to do a great single player game and another to do multiplayer."

With great power, said some fictional mutant, comes great responsibility. PlayStation 4 is clearly the great power of which the web-slinging prophet foretold, but in the absence of a higher authority, Ready At Dawn must shoulder said responsibility for the time being. It's quite the burden for the studio to bear, and Sony must be aware of this. But from what we've seen and what the team has told us, we're ready to believe that this steampunk shooter could be the game to really show what the PS4 is capable of.







■ It's clearly London, but not as you might know it. Still a bit grimy, but cooler thanks to railguns.



Change The World

Four other games that saw fit to mess with history

Command & Conquer: Red Alert (PC, 1996)

■ Einstein and time travel were presumably the only two bullet points on the plot summary for this bad boy, since EA's classic RTS basically takes these two jumping-off points and makes the rest up as it goes along.

Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge (Xbox, 2003)

■ There's not actually a great deal of history ignorance going on here, save for the fact that technological advances happened a few years earlier than they should. Still, if that gives us cool planes against an even cooler backdrop, who are we to argue?

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots (PS3, 2008)

■ In an era when most of us still struggled to get a mobile signal, Kojima decided to shift the focus away from his mulleted clones and onto the proliferation of nanomachines. Which still aren't even a thing, calling the whole *MGS* timeline into question…

Wolfenstein: The New Order (Multi, 2014)

■ Taking the 'What if…?' card to the extreme, MachineGames' new shooter posits the idea that the Nazis actually won the war and somehow used what little downtime they had to develop giant, evil mechs to help them bring the world under their control.



In a time when next-gen console owners find themselves preoccupied in petty squabbles over 1080p standard and unexpected price drops, all while waiting anxiously for a triple-A franchise to finally be confirmed, it's the handheld console that continues to leap from strength to strength.

The past twelve months have seen both Nintendo's 3DS and Sony's Vita celebrate their most successful year and boast a glut of imaginative releases as developers both big and small swoon over the creative possibilities of the hardware. And while both Nintendo and Sony's portable systems have proven their credentials as the perfect platform for critically venerated indie projects, they have also asserted themselves as powerful competitors in the triple-A arena with some of the biggest releases of the year native to 3DS and Vita.

Now, as Nintendo readies some of its biggest franchises to arrive on 3DS over the next year and with the powerful pairing of the Vita and PlayStation 4, it's never been a most prosperous time for the portable console. Celebrating the age of the handheld, **games™** takes a closer look at the 3DS and Vita, their essential titles, landmark events and the developers that have defined their success. There is no better time to be a handheld gamer.

AGE OF THE HANDHELD

GAMES™ TAKES A LOOK AT THE REVOLUTION IN POCKET GAMING



HARDWARE

Motion controls, 3D, touch pads, wireless compatibility – we examine exactly how much success is owed to the 3DS' and Vita's hardware

43 MILLION Global hardware sales of 3DS

NINTENDO 3DS

The 3DS was the first mainstream piece of technology that allowed players to experience 3D effects without the use of glasses. This alone was a strong gimmick that helped push the first wave of consoles out. When used well, the 3D achieves a genuinely immersive sense of depth. However, complaints started to surface about the effects continued 3D use had on players – some complained of migraines, sickness, eye-strain, while others quickly tired of the viewing angle required when 3D was turned on. The control the console gave you over how much you use the 3D deftly counteracted any criticisms, though; don't like the effect? Just turn it off. Nintendo was one step ahead of the game there, something we don't often get to say.

Unfortunately, the insistence on implementing the 3D effect on native 3DS games means that games on the console rarely achieve a resolution better than 400x240 – pitifully small compared to the Vita's 640x960. This is offset by the sort of games the 3DS offers – titles are typically sprite-based, or 2.5D, and work better for focusing on art direction, rather than graphical fidelity. The low resolution also allows the console to take advantage of the two cameras that come with the hardware – the ability to take 3D pictures sounds trite, but has offered players more entertainment value than you'd expect. This camera also lets the console make use of Augmented Reality – which started with a set of cards that came with each console and these days we see in aspects of the 3DS like StreetPass.

Being able to turn off the 3D aspect of the console was a smart move by Nintendo.

"Nintendo was one step ahead of the game, something we don't often get to say"

PSVITA

The Vita was very much a revision to the PSP formula Sony had tried out years before – shaping up in a very familiar fashion, the Vita introduced a pair of touchscreens; one on the front, and one on the back. Complete with a five inch OLED screen (the best on the market) and weighing practically nothing, the Vita came pre-equipped with everything it needed to find a home in the pockets of the hardcore gamer.

Our favourite thing about the Vita is its screen – with a resolution density of 220ppi, the console is capable of providing games with graphics that far exceed anything you'll see elsewhere on the handheld market. The screen also operates as a control pad, and a mighty precise one, to boot. Beneath the screen lies a three-axis accelerometer and gyroscopes, allowing motion controls to be implemented in a very reactive and functional manner (although the only game we've really seen take advantage of this is *Gravity Rush*).

Unfortunately, Sony insisted on shipping the Vita with no internal storage, leading to its most influential downfall – you *have* to spend extra money on the console to even make it operational. This has been remedied (slightly) in the newer Vita Slim (which comes with 1GB storage), but to really make the most of the console, you have to shell out a good £30-£50 for a decent memory card. Even games that come on cartridges require installation to play – nothing can be done on the Vita without a Sony-specific memory card.

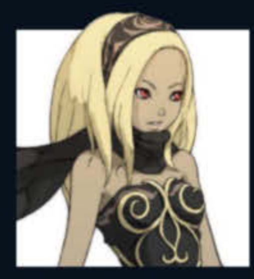


7.6 MILLION Global hardware sales of Vita

You'll be needing to shell out extra for one of these if you want to play your Vita.

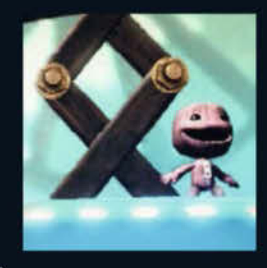
ESSENTIAL GAMES TO OWN

While there's plenty to look forward to in the future, both consoles already boast an impressively varied and vast library of quality software









GRAVITY RUSH

Developer: Project Siren

One of the first titles to embrace the nascent capabilities of the Vita, *Gravity Rush* is a bewitching portable adventure that enables players to graciously manipulate the laws of physics in an evocative Dickensian landscape. The system has yet to receive another title to match its breadth of scope matched with an effective utilisation of the handheld's unique functionality.

TEARAWAY

Developer: Media Molecule

Trust in the developer of *LittleBigPlanet* to show other Vita developers how it's done. Media Molecule's instantly entrancing papercraft aesthetic offered the studio a unique opportunity to explore all the bells and whistles of Vita's design and it did so with magnificent aplomb. As players bend and twist the world to their will, the result is a whimsical adventure quite unlike anything else you've played.

PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE

Developer: SuperBot Entertainment, SCE Santa Monica Studio, Bluepoint Games

Some games just work better on Vita. While not exclusive to the system, those that invested enough time in both versions of Sony's *Smash-Bros*-alike *PS All-Stars Battle Royale* came to understand that the handheld iteration was both a slick and capable port perfectly suited for on-the-go gaming. An underrated gem.

UNCHARTED: GOLDEN ABYSS

Developer: Sony Bend

Vita promised a lot in the lead up to its launch and of all its assertions in the fog of pre-release hyperbole, the only thing consumers cared about was whether it could deliver triple-A experiences on a portable system. Right out of the gate, *Uncharted: Golden Abyss* ascertained that Vita could do just that, equalling the franchise's mainline entries in terms of visuals and setpieces.

LITTLEBIGPLANET VITA

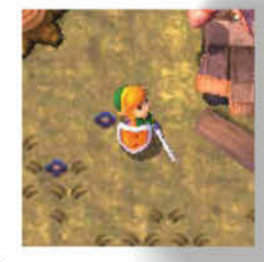
Developer: Double Eleven

Community has been at the heart of the PlayStation brand for years, and expanding that to a portable system was no easy feat. Luckily, with the company's flagship user-generated content title, *LittleBigPlanet Vita* established an interconnected universe of creativity as robust as its forebears, expanding upon the tools needed to craft such extraordinary works.









MARIO KART 7

Developer: Nintendo, Retro Studios

It might be because Nintendo's awkward relationship with online became a little less…well, awkward with the arrival of the 3DS, but *Mario Kart 7* felt like the game *Mario Kart Wii* promised to be. Even without online, *Mario Kart 7* was a formidable sequel, subverting the formula with new vehicles and introducing some of the most inventive courses the series has ever seen.

SUPER MARIO 3D LAND

Developer: Nintendo

There's a reason why so many of the 3DS' highlights come courtesy of Nintendo itself and that's because the company, for better or worse, has always understood better than anyone how to make the most out of its hardware. That's certainly the case with *Super Mario 3D Land*, another inventive platformer starring the portly plumber that utilises the system's 3D capabilities to enhance the features of its game world.

POKÉMON X & Y

Developer: Game Freak

It didn't quite break the mould that has served the franchise for more than a decade, but *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* embraced the system's additional graphical grunt and 3D capabilities to create its most polished rendition of the obsessive vision to date. It makes for a majestic return to form for the series, offering something for both *Pokémon* veterans and newcomers alike.

FIRE EMBLEM AWAKENING

Developer: Nintendo

While no one is questioning the brevity of any of the other titles listed above, *Fire Emblem Awakening* demonstrated the hardware's capacity to foster sprawling epics. Fine-tuning the series' core mechanics and offering a huge amount of depth in both its gameplay and narrative, it remains one of the 3DS' true triumphs as a system.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: A LINK BETWEEN WORLDS

Developer: Nintendo

The *Legend Of Zelda* series has always shied away from direct sequels, but *A Link Between Worlds* returns to the world of *A Link To The Past* and enriches it with a sublime twist on the series' established tropes. The result makes for one of the most surprising *Zelda* entries in years and one of the best in the series' sterling legacy.



EVENTS

Both consoles have defended their piece of the market – but what kept them there?

10.39 MILLION
Sales of 3DS' most successful game/s, *Pokémon X & Y*



3DS

THE 2DS

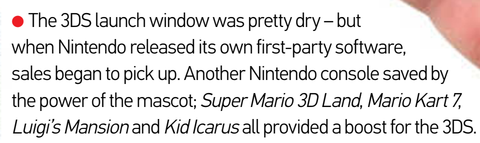


In an odd move for a console that sold itself on the 3D gimmick, the 2DS was released to coincide with the release of *Pokémon X & Y* – there's no denying this was Nintendo's push to get its console into younger players' hands while avoiding the supposed health risks the 3D in the earlier consoles could cause (it was reported the 3D negatively affected the developing eyesight of youngsters). The 2DS was released to a tepid audience, with sales surging after retailers cut the price of the console.

THE EVOLUTION OF STREETPASS



What started as a gimmick intended to make sure you took your 3DS out with you *everywhere*, the StreetPass began morphing into something much more important when developers started to truly understand what it could do. With games like *Animal Crossing: New Leaf*, *Pokémon* and *Bravely Default* using StreetPass/SpotPass in more than just a cosmetic way, Nintendo hit upon a mechanic that we didn't expect to see outside of the smartphone market – it made the social elements actually social.



MARIO SAVES THE DAY

The 3DS launch window was pretty dry – but when Nintendo released its own first-party software, sales began to pick up. Another Nintendo console saved by the power of the mascot; *Super Mario 3D Land*, *Mario Kart 7*, *Luigi's Mansion* and *Kid Icarus* all provided a boost for the 3DS.

"IT HAS NO GAMES!"

For a long time, if you were a Vita owner and pulled out your console proudly to your friends, this is the response you'd get. We always thought that was a fairly shallow opinion – even when the console had a paltry roster behind it, you could still play a good number of PSP and PSone titles (which looked better on the Vita's screen). It was a good year and a half before the Vita became worth a purchase, granted, but once PS+ was introduced and the online games collection launched, the console truly came into its own.

THE LAUNCH OF THE PS4



The announcement of the PS4 last year brought news a little less headline-grabbing; that the Vita had been designed as a sister device to the PS4 all along. The tech powering the Vita was designed in tandem with PS4 architecture, which is why we now have the ability to stream PS4 games to our Vitas, something we wouldn't have imagined at the Vita's launch.

VITA TV



Announced in September last year, the Vita TV promised gamers a way to enjoy their handheld games on the big screen (in up to 1080i resolution). While this may seem redundant – why would you want handheld games on a static screen? – the Vita TV would be an extension of Sony devices that acts as a sort-of hub for your games. Want to play your PS4 at a mate's? Just throw the Vita TV and your Vita in a bag and off you go, sans heavy console.

VITA

1.14 MILLION
Sales of Vita's most successful game, *Uncharted: Golden Abyss*

THE DEVELOPERS

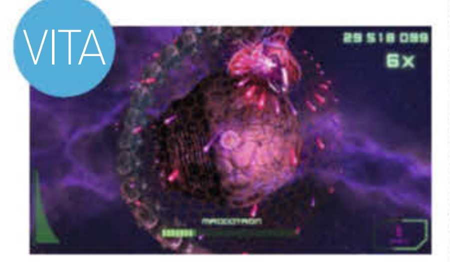
We take a closer look at the studios that have defined the Vita and 3DS to date



HOUSEMARQUE

BACKGROUND: An independent developer based out of Finaland, Housemarque has established itself in recent years as one of the flagship Sony second-party studios developing exclusive titles across all of its platforms.

WHY IT MATTERS: Housemarque makes some of the most addictive and inspiring titles on the marketplace and while it's only worked on one Vita title to date (*Super Stardust Delta*), it masterfully showcased how it can translate its arcade sensibilities and sublime visual delicacies to Sony's high-quality handheld.

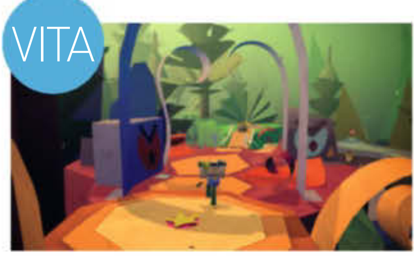


HIGHLIGHTS: Super Stardust Delta

MEDIA MOLECULE

BACKGROUND: Debuting with the gloriously idiosyncratic *LittleBigPlanet*, the UK-based studio has established itself as one of the most inspiring and exciting in the industry.

WHY IT MATTERS: After following *LittleBigPlanet* with a direct sequel, the studio went to work on creating something original for Sony's Vita hardware. The result was the captivating and truly unique *Tearaway*. Unlike so many other developers, Media Molecule sought to understand the potential of the technology and hopefully it'll be given another opportunity to work with the system.

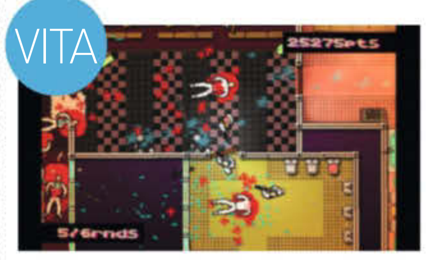


HIGHLIGHTS: Tearaway

INDIE

BACKGROUND: The Vita has been a system that has been absolutely embraced by indie game development. With a huge range of bespoke titles and incredible ports, the Vita is becoming highly regarded as an essential platform.

WHY IT MATTERS: *Hotline Miami* and *Spelunky* have proven perfect for the portable handheld, with its comprehensive controls and gorgeous screen. As the catalogue continues to expand, the Vita is cementing itself as the ultimate indie platform.



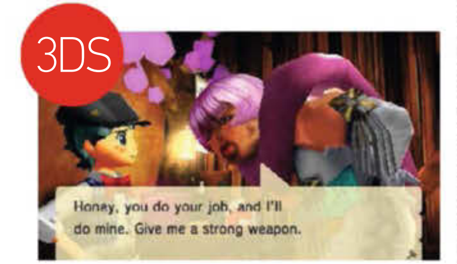
HIGHLIGHTS: Spelunky, Hotline Miami, Thomas Was Alone



LEVEL-5

BACKGROUND: One of the most profitable videogame developers in Japan, Level-5 has garnered a reputation for crafting exceptional fantasy adventures, a range of instantly iconic characters and a broad international accessibility.

WHY IT MATTERS: The *Professor Layton* series continues to leap from strength to strength, with its most recent entry, *Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* making for a strong contender for 3DS' best puzzle game. Match that with the *Inazuma Eleven* series and its *Guild01* work and Level-5 and 3DS is an unstoppable collaboration.



HIGHLIGHTS: Professor Layton vs. Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, Guild01



INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

BACKGROUND: One of Nintendo's premiere first-party development teams, Intelligent Systems has been celebrated for its work across several notable series, including the delightful and deep *Paper Mario* and *Fire Emblem* franchises.

WHY IT MATTERS: Having released just a few titles on 3DS to date, Intelligent Systems has demonstrated both the hardware's capabilities for supporting mammoth single-player experiences in *Fire Emblem: Awakening*, while delving further into the possibilities of the hardware's 3D functionality in Pullbox and its sequel.



HIGHLIGHTS: Pullblox, Fire Emblem: Awakening



NINTENDO

BACKGROUND: With *Mario, Animal Crossing, Zelda, Fire Emblem* and *Pokémon* all returning to the system, we'd be remiss for not including Nintendo, which has assuredly defined quality on the 3DS with its essential first-party line-up.

WHY IT MATTERS: We'd be foolish for not mentioning Nintendo as one of the most important developers working on software for the 3DS, the company knowing its hardware best after all. With Nintendo at the helm, the 3DS is destined to continue to innovate and provide gaming experiences unlike any other console currently on the market.

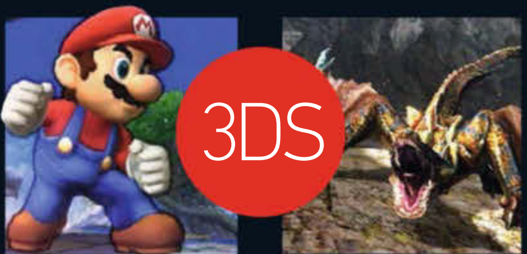


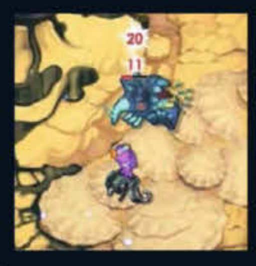
HIGHLIGHTS: TLOZ: A Link Between Worlds, Animal Crossing: New Leaf, Super Mario 3D Land

ESSENTIAL UPCOMING GAMES

The year ahead looks set to continue bolstering the success of the handheld market, with both consoles sporting a diverse and impressive line-up ready to hit the shelves









DRAGON QUEST VII

Developer: Square Enix
ETA: 2014

● Back in October 2012, Square Enix announced it was going to remake the seminal RPG for the 3DS (with a Japanese release in February 2013). Although there are no solid plans to release the game here (yet), Square has been 'evaluating' its reception, spurring the fervent *Dragon Quest* community into setting up online petitions, Facebook groups and forum threads.

SUPER SMASH BROS.

Developer: Sora Ltd/Namco Bandai Games
ETA: 2014

● The newest instalment of the *Super Smash Bros.* franchise will see a dual release between on Wii U and 3DS, with the latter focusing on creating a more 'customisable' experience with a more distinctive art styling. The handheld version will have different levels and arenas focused on Nintendo's handheld legacy.

MONSTER HUNTER 4 ULTIMATE

Developer: Capcom
ETA: Q4 2014

● *Monster Hunter 4 Ultimate* will be the first game in the series to feature integrated online multiplayer – making the most of the co-op thrill found in taking down monstrosities on the small screen. The game seeks to capitalise on the 3D aspect of the 3DS by putting a stronger emphasis on 3D movement and animation.

SQUIDS ODYSSEY

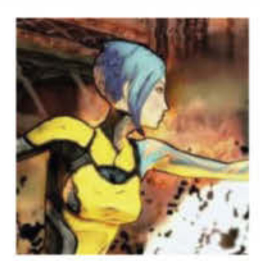
Developer: The Game Bakers
ETA: 2014

● Imagine *Spider-Man*'s Venom being hurled into the sea, tasked with infecting all the lovable Disney-like creatures that live beneath the waves with his symbiotic nightmare tentacles. That's the hellish scenario you're confronted with in *Squid's Odyssey* – a remake of *Squids* and *Squids Wild West*. It's an action-RPG with a twist; landing comfortably in the lap of the 3DS' prime audience.

KIRBY: TRIPLE DELUXE

Developer: HAL Laboratory
ETA: 16 May

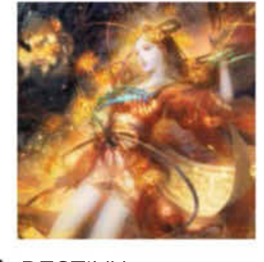
● Announced at a Nintendo Direct event last year, the 2.5D platformer will be the 13th *Kirby* game in the canon. Gameplay will see players shift between foreground and background planes, following Kirby as the eponymous pink blob attempts to figure out why his house (and everything else in Dream Land) was displaced by a giant beanstalk. Poor Kirby.











BORDERLANDS 2

Developer: Gearbox
ETA: Q2 2014

● The smash console hit is making its way to Vita (after months of teasing) this spring, and it's bringing all the DLC packs thus far released with it. With a very slight, almost negligible, quality drop from the console version, the Vita release will even feature cross-saving – meaning you can carry on with progress you might have made if you picked up *Borderlands 2* at launch and played it on the PS3 or PS4 via Plus.

HOHOKUM

Developer: Honeyslug
ETA: Q2 2014

● Remember *The Mighty Boosh*? Ever wanted to play a game inspired by the off-the-wall BBC sitcom/sketch show? Well, thanks to *Hohokum*, now you can! Labelled as an experience, more than a game, *Hohokum* will feature an environment swirling with colour, as sound and visuals interact in a beguiling sensory experience. The game will see Honeyslug take advantage of the Vita's touchscreen and gyroscopes.

MURASAKI BABY

Developer: Ovosonico
ETA: 2014

● *Murasaki Baby* (literal translation: 'purple baby') is a side-scrolling puzzle game developed by Ubisoft Montreal and Grasshopper Manufacture alum Massimo Guarini's new indie outfit. Baby lives in a world that consists purely of childhood fears and phobias, and its your job to guide Baby through the world with your finger – giving and taking the kid's balloon with your finger to dictate its mood, flicking switches and so on.

HELLDIVERS

Developer: Arrowhead game Studios
ETA: 2014

● A cross-platform release that will launch on PS3, PS4 and Vita, *Helldivers* is a top-down shooter that takes care to observe all the tropes and themes in your typical dystopia and subvert them. It looks like it's mostly been designed for co-op – utilising the Vita's cross-play potential, you can play on the sofa while your friend plays on the TV. We're pretty excited about this – there aren't enough PS4/Vita experiences.

DESTINY OF SPIRITS

Developer: Studio Japan
ETA: 2014

● A Vita exclusive, *Destiny Of Spirits* will be a free-to-play, online-only RPG. Players are tasked with catching 'spirits' in real-world locations and then pitting these phantasmagoria against each other in brutal turn-based combat. We're dubious about an online only Vita game – typically most Vitas are wi-fi only nowadays, and the 3G tariffs are a bit much. Still, the game's ambition is admirable.

gamesTM SUBSCRIPTIONVOUCHER

☐ YES I would like to subscribe to games™

YOUR DETAILS

Title______________ First name______________________________

Surname____

Address____

____

____

Postcode____________________ Country____________________

Telephone number__________________________________

Mobile number____________________________________

Email address_____________________________________

Please complete your email address to receive news and special offers from us

DIRECT DEBIT PAYMENT

☐ **UK Direct Debit Payment**

I will pay only £15 for 6 issues (saving 50%*)

Instruction to your Bank or Building Society to pay by Direct Debit

Please fill in the form and send it to: games™ Subscriptions Dept, 800 Guillat Avenue, Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne ME9 8GU

Name and full postal address of your Bank or Building Society

To: The Manager ______ Bank/Building Society

Address

____

____

Postcode

Name(s) of account holder(s)

Branch sort code

Bank/Building Society account number

Originator's Identification Number

5	0	1	8	8	4

Reference Number

Instructions to your Bank or Building Society
Please pay Imagine Publishing Limited Direct Debits from the account detailed in this instruction subject to the safeguards assured by the Direct Debit guarantee. I understand that this instruction may remain with Imagine Publishing Limited and, if so, details will be passed on electronically to my Bank/Building Society

Signature(s)

Date

Banks and Building Societies may not accept Direct Debit instructions for some types of account

A6 instruction form

PAYMENT DETAILS

YOUR EXCLUSIVE READER PRICE, ONE YEAR (13 ISSUES)

☐ **UK: £52.00 (Save 20%)** ☐ **Europe: £70.00**

☐ **World: £80.00**

Cheque

☐ I enclose a cheque for £__________________________

(made payable to Imagine Publishing Ltd)

Credit/Debit Card

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Amex ☐ Maestro

Card number

Expiry date

Issue number ☐☐ (if Maestro)

Signed ____

Date ____

Code: PAL141Q Please tick if you do not wish to receive any promotional material from Imagine Publishing Ltd by post ☐ by telephone ☐ via email ☐

Please tick if you do not wish to receive any promotional material from other companies by post ☐ by telephone ☐ Please tick if you DO wish to receive such information via email ☐

I would like my subscription to start from issue:

Return this order form to:

games™ Subscriptions Department, 800 Guillat Avenue, Kent Science Park, Sittingbourne, ME9 8GU or email it to gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk

You will be able to view your subscription details online at www.imaginesubs.co.uk



FANTASTIC SUBSCRIBER OFFER

Subscribe today and save 50%*

- Pay only £2.50 for every future issue – a 50% saving on the store price
- Free UK delivery to your door
- Never miss an issue
- Money-back guarantee

*Terms & Conditions

Pricing will revert to our standard offer of £21 every 6 issues on the third payment made. Subscribers can cancel this subscription at any time. New subscriptions will start from the next available issue. Offer code PAL141Q must be quoted to receive this special subscription price. Details of the direct debit guarantee are available on request. Offer expires 30th June 2014. Imagine Publishing reserves the right to limit this type of offer to one per household.

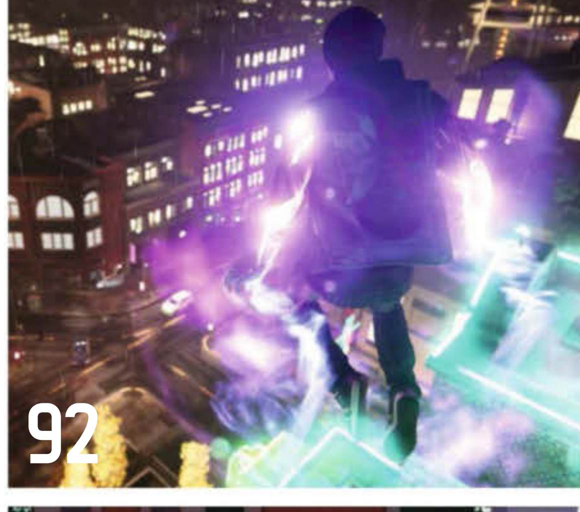
Reviews





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:


facebook.com/gamesTM


@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright


gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

MULTIPLAYER MECHA

Titanfall

When key members of Infinity Ward left to form Respawn Entertainment and make *Titanfall*, the question they had to answer was: could the studio make a game that's as exhilarating and compulsive as the early *Modern Warfare* titles that made the Infinity Ward alumni famous? As it turns out, the answer to that question is yes. We won't just leave it there, though, as there's a hell of a lot more to say about Respawn's first foray into games.

The concept of a game in which the player can take out another human opponent with a shotgun, jump out of window, run across a wall and land in a gigantic mech, before launching a salvo of missiles at an enemy Titan and then ripping an opposing player from the chest of the damaged robotic beast is a compelling one. It's also a concept that the cynic inside you might understandably interpret as little more than a dressing up of a tired formula, an indication that *Titanfall* is about nothing but spectacle. To an extent, yes, *Titanfall* is about spectacle, but it's also a fresh, taut and incredibly well-balanced shooter that is a hell of a lot of fun.

When playing as a human Pilot, *Titanfall* is all about kineticism and fluidity. We may have seen freerunning mechanics in a multiplayer shooter before in the form of *Brink*, but we've certainly not seen them implemented with the panache that Respawn displays here. And once the freerunning clicks, it's both easy and satisfying to move quickly across the map, scaling walls, bounding between roofs using your jetpack boost and flying in and out of windows to take out enemies or capture objectives.

While the mechs – Titans, to use the game's parlance – are by no means slow, things do, almost counterintuitively, take on a more considered approach when you get yourself into the hulking metal suit. Titans are, of course, powerful and using them to take out fleeing human enemies or, most enjoyably of all, to destroy opposing Titans, is a great deal of fun. However, Respawn has managed to balance that sense of power with an awareness of how vulnerable your Titan can be in the wrong situations. It's important that you are cautious about getting outnumbered as a Titan and make use of the abilities in your loadout to turn combat encounters in your favour. Confined spaces mean that Pilots can become dangerous too, taking pot-shots at you from rooftops and windows, or jumping atop your Titan in order to do shield bypassing damage.

In fact, it is the way that combat between Pilots and Titans is balanced, and the way that the game's maps are designed to feel natural for both, that is perhaps one of the game's most impressive aspects. You can get around relatively swiftly regardless of

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MULTIPLAYER ONLY Kudos to Respawn for having the bravery to do away with the single-player mode that feels unnecessary in so many first-person shooters. Focusing on multiplayer has undoubtedly benefitted this game.

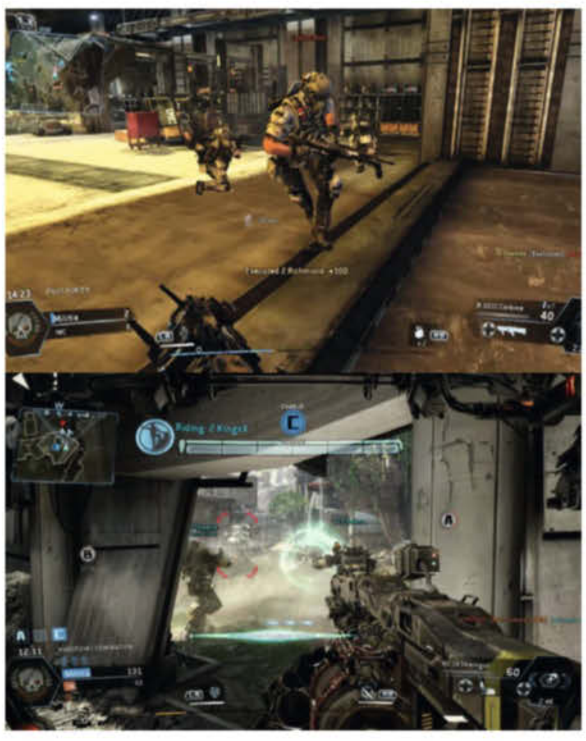
TITANFALL SUCCESSFULLY MAKES CONCESSIONS TO BEING ACCESSIBLE WHILST ENSURING THAT THOSE WHO ARE BETTER AT THE GAME WILL STILL FIND THE EXPERIENCE REWARDING



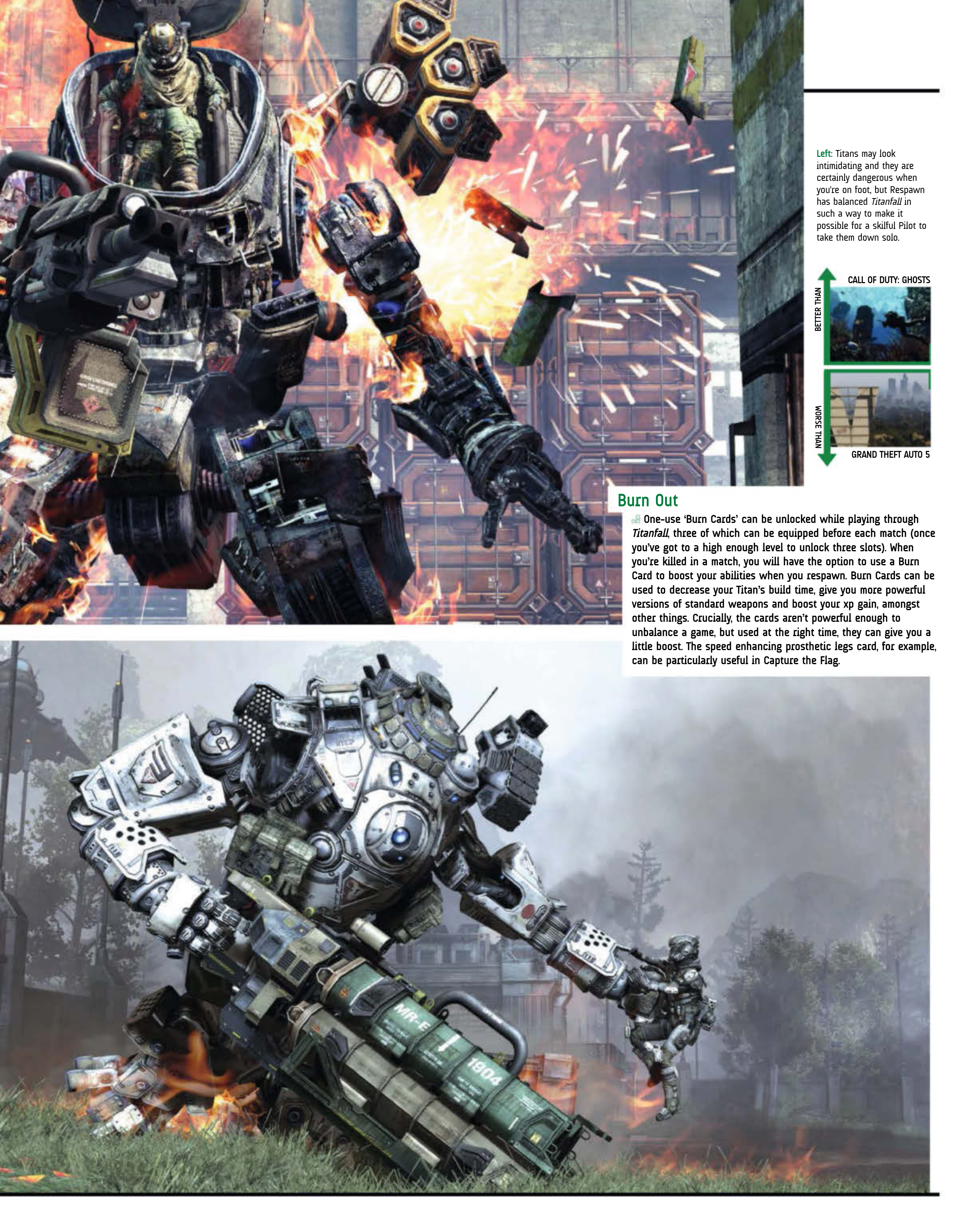
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: America
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Respawn Entertainment
PRICE: £41.99
RELEASE: 14 March (US: 11 March)
PLAYERS: Up to 12 Online (6v6)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: These are grunts. Grunts are rubbish. They won't give you a lot of points in Attrition, but they're worth taking out to reduce your Titan build time, if for no other reason.



Above: There are a range of ordinances that you can pick to equip to your Titan. In this case, we've got lock-on missiles.



Left: Titans may look intimidating and they are certainly dangerous when you're on foot, but Respawn has balanced *Titanfall* in such a way to make it possible for a skilful Pilot to take them down solo.

BETTER THAN — CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS

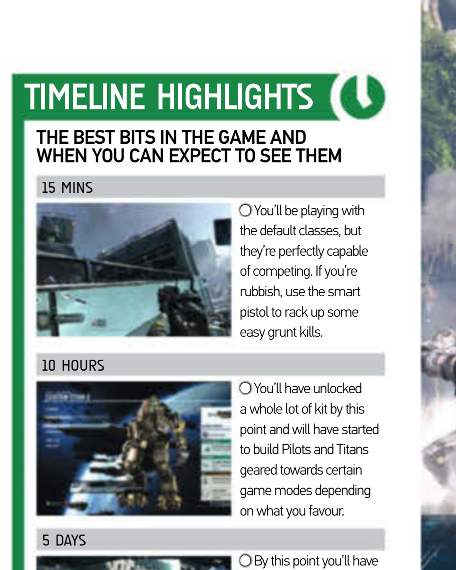
WORSE THAN — GRAND THEFT AUTO 5

Burn Out

One-use 'Burn Cards' can be unlocked while playing through *Titanfall*, three of which can be equipped before each match (once you've got to a high enough level to unlock three slots). When you're killed in a match, you will have the option to use a Burn Card to boost your abilities when you respawn. Burn Cards can be used to decrease your Titan's build time, give you more powerful versions of standard weapons and boost your xp gain, amongst other things. Crucially, the cards aren't powerful enough to unbalance a game, but used at the right time, they can give you a little boost. The speed enhancing prosthetic legs card, for example, can be particularly useful in Capture the Flag.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM



15 MINS

You'll be playing with the default classes, but they're perfectly capable of competing. If you're rubbish, use the smart pistol to rack up some easy grunt kills.

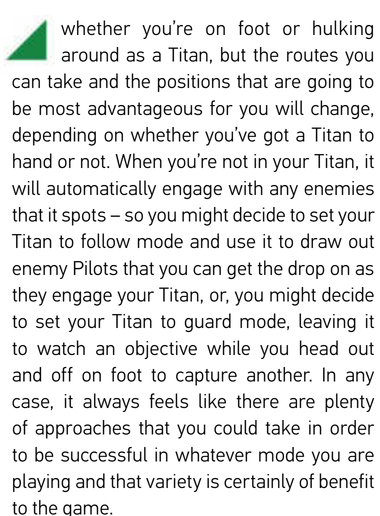
10 HOURS

You'll have unlocked a whole lot of kit by this point and will have started to build Pilots and Titans geared towards certain game modes depending on what you favour.

5 DAYS

By this point you'll have gone through the decision of whether to regenerate (*Titanfall*'s prestiging) or not. Personally, we don't want to lose that multi-target missile system.





whether you're on foot or hulking around as a Titan, but the routes you can take and the positions that are going to be most advantageous for you will change, depending on whether you've got a Titan to hand or not. When you're not in your Titan, it will automatically engage with any enemies that it spots – so you might decide to set your Titan to follow mode and use it to draw out enemy Pilots that you can get the drop on as they engage your Titan, or, you might decide to set your Titan to guard mode, leaving it to watch an objective while you head out and off on foot to capture another. In any case, it always feels like there are plenty of approaches that you could take in order to be successful in whatever mode you are playing and that variety is certainly of benefit to the game.

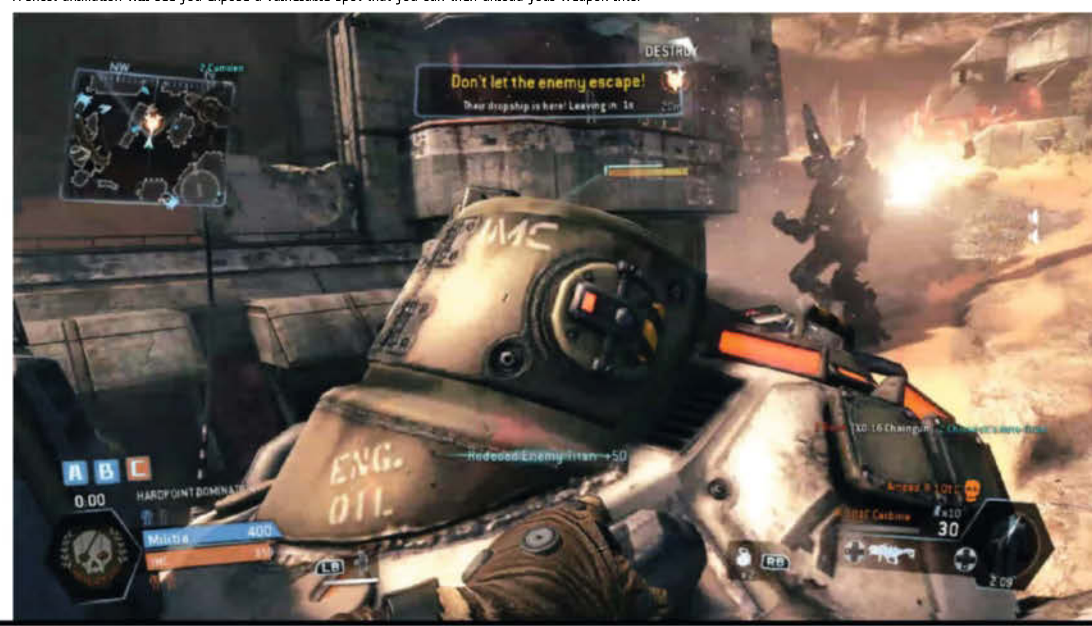
As well as getting the balance between Pilots and Titans right, it's clear that Respawn has also thought very hard about how to make the game accessible to players who aren't so hot at first-person shooters, who might not know their *Call Of Duty* perks from their *Battlefield* classes, all without detracting from the enjoyment of veterans of the genre. Chief of the ways in which Respawn has done this is by borrowing an idea from MOBAs and including AI-controlled enemies that are little more than cannon fodder. Killing these enemies is a cinch for anyone and gives a chance for the less nimble-fingered to contribute to the cause and rack up a few kills without too much trouble. Crucially, though, killing these enemies is not worth as many points as are Pilots and Titans, so better players who simply pick off a few of these AI opponents in-between Pilot kills will still have a far greater impact on the game.

The same goes for *Titanfall*'s smart pistol – a weapon that locks on to enemy targets, negating the need to aim accurately at your

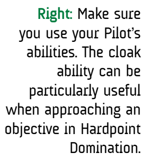
Get Your Titanfill

Alongside the campaign multiplayer, *Titanfall* has five game modes. Attrition is *Titanfall*'s de facto 'standard mode'. Points are awarded to your team whenever you kill AI grunts and spectres, human Pilots and Titans. The team that reaches the requisite score first wins. Hardpoint Domination is an objective-based mode where players must capture and hold as many of the three objectives on the map as they can. There's also Capture the Flag, which speaks for itself, and Pilot Hunter (the weakest of the modes) in which only Pilot kills count towards the match winning total. Finally, there's the surprisingly strategic Last Titan Standing in which you start with one Titan and one life – whoever's left, wins.

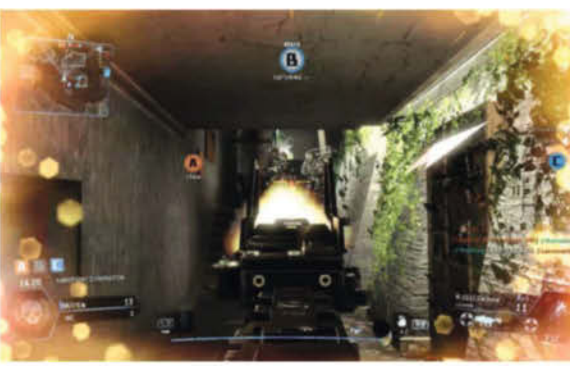
Below: As a Pilot, you can jump on top on enemy Titans (it's called rodeoing in the game). A short animation will see you expose a vulnerable spot that you can then unload your weapon into.



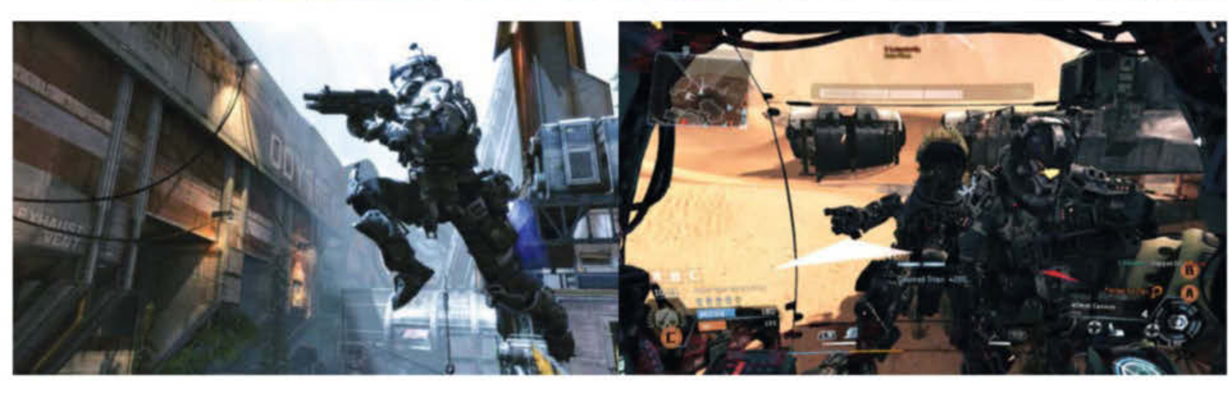
Left: There's a relatively small selection of weapons available to equip to your Pilot. Fortunately, the game doesn't suffer as a result.



Right: Make sure you use your Pilot's abilities. The cloak ability can be particularly useful when approaching an objective in Hardpoint Domination.







Left: If you get a Titan's health down low enough and initiate a melee attack before the Pilot has ejected, it's possible to rip the Pilot out from the heart of their Titan. Guess what? It's very satisfying.

foes. Yes, the smart pistol makes taking out AI grunts a piece of cake for inexperienced players, but against a skilled opponent in a one on one battle, the time it takes to get the pistol to lock on and get your shots away means that you'll come off worse almost every time.

It's also worth mentioning that every player will get Titans during a match, meaning that those who aren't as good don't get locked out of the fun of throwing their weight around in one of the big metal beasts. Those who play well, though, will have the build time of their Titan reduced significantly as they rack up kills. It's a system indicative of the way that *Titanfall* successful makes concessions to being accessible whilst ensuring that those that are better at the game will still find the experience rewarding.

Titanfall is notable for deciding to forgo the inclusion of a single-player campaign (a move that other shooters might do well to learn from) and has instead supplemented it with a storyline-laced campaign multiplayer mode. It's an interesting experiment, but a failed one. The conflict between *Titanfall*'s two factions – The IMC and The Militia – is detailed in brief instances before the start of each match and through background chatter that takes place during the games. The main problem is that the background chatter becomes just that – something in the periphery that's far from the front of your mind as you focus on the chaos around you. You'll have neither the time nor inclination to pay adequate attention to the tale you're being told and it quickly becomes noise spouted by characters that you don't care about, if you know who they are at all. In fairness, *Titanfall*'s weak campaign mode doesn't really detract from the game, amounting as it does to a glorified playlist, but neither does it add anything to it either.

When it comes to game modes, weapons and loadouts, *Titanfall* is a bit lacking it comparison to other multiplayer shooters in terms of sheer numbers. That might be a concern when it comes to longevity, but it's more important that *Titanfall* is exciting to play, than that it has a long list of game modes and weapons. *Titanfall* has that in its favour. In any case, we've found there to be enough variety to the way that games play out and a broad enough range of options as to how to approach those games as a player, to believe that *Titanfall* will not suffer greatly from any perceived lack of content when it comes to game modes, weapons and the like.

Titanfall is not the most strategically demanding multiplayer game out there, nor is it the most complex. It's certainly not revolutionary, as some might have you believe, given that many of its ideas have been cribbed from other games and genres. What it is, though, is a consistently exciting, accessible and expertly crafted shooter that repeatedly generates highlight reel moments that make you want to keep coming back. Forget about whether it's an Xbox One system seller, if it can beat *Call Of Duty*, or any similar chatter. All you need to know is that *Titanfall* is damn good fun.

Above: The ease and creativity with which *Titanfall*'s freerunning system allows you to move around the maps is one of the game's most appealing aspects.

WE'VE SEEN FREERUNNING MECHANICS IN A MULTIPLAYER SHOOTER BEFORE, BUT WE'VE NOT SEEN THEM IMPLEMENTED WITH THE PANACHE THAT'S DISPLAYED HERE

FAQs

Q. IS 12 PLAYERS ENOUGH?
Yes. The numbers sound sparse compared to other multiplayer shooters, but the fact is 6 vs 6 feels right for *Titanfall*.

Q. DOES IT HAVE PRESTIGE?
Yes, but in *Titanfall* it's called 'regenerating'. You'll have the option to regenerate once you reach level 50.

Q. ANY MICROTRANSACTIONS?
No, and Respawn has said it won't be adding any down the line either.

SYNTHESIS
BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

INTRODUCING CREEPS AI controlled 'creeps' are a regular feature in MOBAs. *Titanfall* brings the concept to the first-person shooter genre – a smart way of making the game accessible to inexperienced players.

VERDICT 9/10
AN EXPERTLY CRAFTED AND COMPULSIVE ONLINE SHOOTER

SMELLS LIKE TEEN SPIRIT

InFamous: Second Son

"Don't be a dick" is the solid advice dispensed to *InFamous: Second Son*'s hipster protagonist, Delsin Rowe, by his law-enforcement brother prior to embarking on another mission involving flambéing government drones. It's as if Sucker Punch listened to the criticisms levied at the series in the past. This fairly simple directive echoes through the quip-laden script and the various actions the super-charged hero/villain undertakes, bringing to light a little of the studio's personality formerly found in the *Sly Cooper* series.

Delsin is brash, smug and naïve to a fault and, while this doesn't completely solve all of the problems the series faced with previous protagonist Cole McGrath (and keep an eye out for a storefront reference to *InFamous*' previous lead), it does freshen up the concept substantially, bringing with it a suite of new powers that add some gratifying clout to proceedings.

Appropriately endowed with the skill to absorb other Conduits' abilities, Delsin never has a single defining trait. Smoke and Neon aren't exactly extensions of his personality, while his penchant for graffiti only serves as a reminder that, before he became a crusading watchman, he wasn't opposed to breaking a few laws. The Seattleite roams around his domain with a childlike exuberance, embracing his mounting strength and omnipotence, and here's what differentiates *Second Son* from its predecessors: you feel like your actions have an impact on the character. Or, to put it another way, he's not a dick unless you make him one.

It all starts once you reach Seattle, which is why it's strange that it takes the game so long to actually get to the Emerald City. Beginning with the defilement of a political billboard in an anti-establishment act of 'tagging' (the player having to awkwardly turn the DualShock

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

VISUAL AFFECTION *InFamous: Second Son* is the best looking game on next-gen consoles to date. If this is just a taster of what we can expect from the PS4, then you can consider us very excited for the future of the hardware.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sony
DEVELOPER: Sucker Punch
PRICE: £47.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: Fetch is one of the more interesting characters that you encounter in the game. Sucker Punch's script has plenty of interesting dynamics between characters and they seemed to have nailed down the playful banter that makes *Uncharted* so successful.

THE STUDIO HAS TAKEN A FEW NOTES FROM ITS SONY STABLEMATES NAUGHTY DOG WHEN IT COMES TO CREATING EFFECTIVE THIRD-PERSON COMBAT MECHANICS





Right: Delsin has a devastating special attack for each of his powers. It's hard to tell whether this all-encompassing strike just incapacitates enemies, or completely obliterates them. Again, the game's vague understanding of morals makes it hard to tell.





UPGRADE TREE

Delsin has the option to upgrade his abilities throughout the course of the game by collecting shards he finds. The upgrade tree is located in the options screen and spirals off in various directions depending on whether you take the 'good' or 'evil' path, with only certain powers available to you depending on how much or little you've been an asshole. However, it's all a bit of a mess visually, with several upgrades available for specific powers, others only unlocked after reaching a particular level and a different amount of shards for others, sometimes it's hard to tell what is available to you at any one time. A more linear system and clearer diagram that could convey which options are available to the player would've been welcome.

controller and rattle its insides to ready the paint can), the opening of the game is needlessly bloated as a spiritless chase across a lake shuffles into a lengthy preamble introducing the major characters. Luckily, once Seattle is established as Delsin's new turf, things pick-up considerably.

It clearly helps that Sucker Punch itself is based in Bellevue, one Lake Washington away from the city of Seattle itself. It's affectionately recreated here, and there's enough diversity among the various regions, from the flat rooftops of its civic districts to the towering skyscrapers that make-up its corporate hub, allowing plenty of breathing room for Delsin to explore the full strength of his newly-awarded powers.

Yet, while it's by far one of the most eye-catching pieces of scenery you'll have seen in the medium – and wait until you see the myriad of weather effects that transform the city's streets – it lacks the defining iconography (outside of the Space Needle – which is disappointingly under-utilised) to really make it distinctive among open worlds. It's also a little cluttered, particularly with DUP (Department of Unified Protection – sort of anti-Conduit police force) outposts, seemingly scattered randomly across the map providing a regular impasse and objective for Delsin during his free-roaming antics – demolish the DUP constructions and you'll gradually reclaim ownership of the streets.

Delsin is well equipped for that task. The post-grunge super-person acquires a selection of powers along the way. He begins with Smoke, which unleashes cinder-like projectiles, while his chain melee attack is engulfed in smouldering flame, and there's also a dash manoeuvre that allows Delsin to teleport via smoke vents. Although this is just the first of a handful of powers that you'll pick-up, it sets the template for what you can expect across each of the others. Much like the way that while all guns shoot bullets, their actual method of projection differs. Melee, projectile, grenades, dash and special all serve the same purpose across each new power, with tweaks to accuracy, power and distance depending on which flavour you're currently possessing (smoke is absorbed from vents and flaming wreckage, whereas neon – the second acquired power – is drained from day-glo signage).

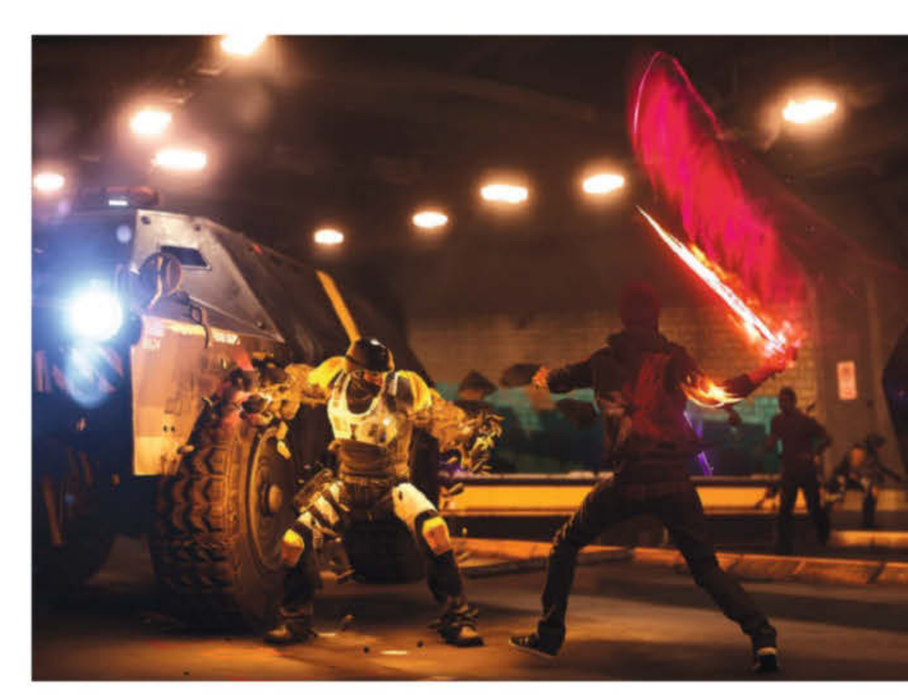
Sucker Punch has tightened up a lot of the combat mechanics. Shooting is the standout among the enhancements; the new run-and-gun model allowing for quick-fire attacks to precisely reach where the reticule is aiming (although, the option of over-the-shoulder remains). It's a competent system and it's

FAQs

Q. IS DELSIN COOL?
Well, it depends on whether you like hipster douchebags. Still, we warmed to him by the end of the campaign.

Q. HOW'S THE OPEN WORLD?
It's certainly beautiful to look at, but it lacks a certain something to make it one of the all-time greats.

Q. BETTER THAN INFAMOUS 2?
It's definitely the best *InFamous* game to date, but it still lacks a certain something to elevate the series to classic status.



Right: If you're trying to complete the game without fatally injuring any DUP agents, then it can be hard to tell which of Delsin's moves have a lethal impact and which just temporarily incapacitate enemies. As is often the case, the dark side is always more tempting.



Above: Delsin's brother Reggie helps in finding core relays scattered across Seattle that enable Delsin to upgrade his newly-discovered powers. He also acts as the voice of reason throughout the majority of the game's campaign.

Right: Troy Baker voices Delsin and gives the role a great amount more depth than it probably deserves.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

2 MINS

We're introduced to the next saviour of humanity as he spray-paints rubbish graffiti on a political billboard. We'll be honest, it's not the best first impression.

1 HOUR



Having arrived in Seattle, you'll be getting your bearings and seeking out the next Conduit to drain their powers. Take a minute to breathe in the scenery.

8 HOURS

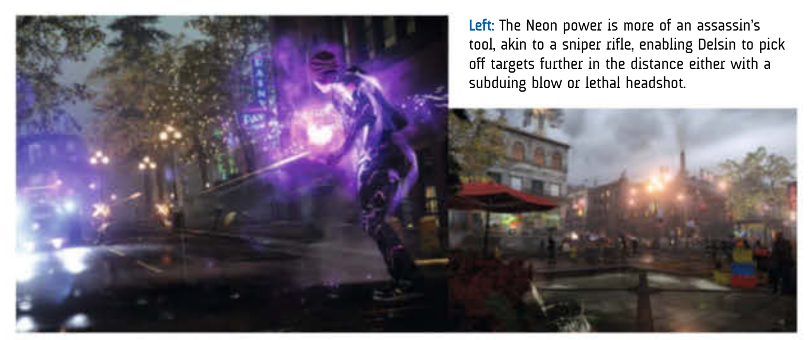


You've now gained a couple of powers and the map has opened up. Although, the game has yet to shift into a higher gear and deliver a show-stopping mission.

THIS IS A MARKED IMPROVEMENT ON ITS PREDECESSORS, BOTH NARRATIVELY AND GAMEPLAY-WISE, AND IT'S A HUGE AMOUNT OF FUN TO PLAY FROM START TO FINISH

SPACE INVADER

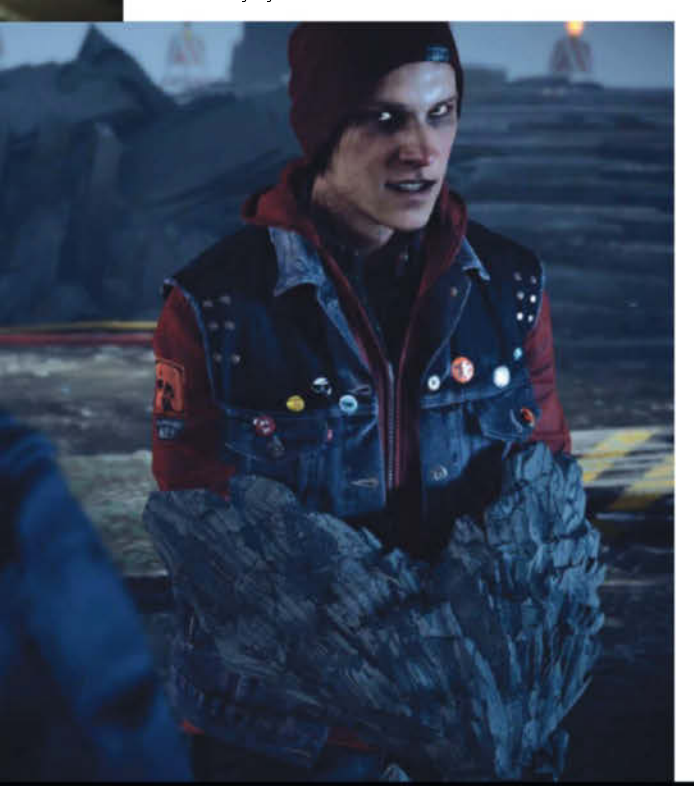
InFamous: Second Son is packed full of references, both to the series' past, as well as other iconic videogame franchises, worth looking out for. One particularly impressive gag inserted into the game is the flying DUP drones that circle the game map. Emitting a sound that's just like the mystery ship in the classic arcade game *Space Invaders*, these non-lethal UFOs can be shot down to claim a bonus. Manage to destroy one and you can recover a shard that can be used towards further power upgrades. *Second Son* is also littered with non-game pop culture references, several that are orientated around the indie music scene that Seattle (home of Nirvana) is famous for.



Left: The Neon power is more of an assassin's tool, akin to a sniper rifle, enabling Delsin to pick off targets further in the distance either with a subduing blow or lethal headshot.



Above: While most of the levels take place inside Seattle, a few stray beyond its boundaries. In one particularly mission, you're transported inside a videogame (meta!) and have to battle winged demons. It's a bit like the TV station stage in *DmC: Devil May Cry*.



clear the studio has taken a few notes from its Sony stablemates Naughty Dog when it comes to creating effective third-person combat mechanics.

Still, it does disappoint if only in its lack of ambition. Melee, much like shooting, has been somewhar refined; Delsin, for example, is now able to whip around enemies with his arm-tethered chain (charged with whichever ability is equipped at the time) in a simplistic combo. But it feels like there could be a deeper set of mechanics that fuse more cohesively, creating more empowering battle scenarios. They're undoubtedly stunning to look at, but there's something a little hollow that prevents the action from becoming truly thrilling.

There are also a few too many uses of the DualShock's motion controls shoehorned into the gameplay for little other than what we would assume is some sort of Sony mandate. Fingerprint scanning and spray-can rattling do little to enliven the gameplay itself and would've best been left on the brainstorming board. These additions are indivative of the lack of creativity that permeates *Second Son*. It's not to say that it's a bad game – far from it – but there's nothing that can be thought of as particularly memorable. The mission structure is so regimented that, just a few hours after completing the game, it's hard to recall a single chapter as particularly noteworthy.

The game is divided thus: Delsin chases Conduit, gains power, hunts out a series of transistors that upgrade his new ability and then goes on a mission with the Conduit before the process repeats itself. The formula is mixed up enough by some engaging environments, enemies and powers, but there's little in the way of surprise. Still, there's some variation offered in the returning karma system. Once again, players get to decide whether the protagonist takes a heroic or evil path through the world he inhabits and, outside of everyday encounters with citizens and enemies, these arrive in the form of binary 'good' or 'evil' scenarios. Do you save the recovering drug-addict Conduit, Fetch, from her vengeful quest to murder drug dealers, or corrupt her into being your personal assassin? There's nothing particularly morally grey about these decisions, so this will likely come down to the type of character you decided to play as right at the beginning of the story. It does add a bit of dynamism to the story, even if Sucker Punch can't quite work out what constitutes as a noble deed or an evil one (if you choose to rehabilitate Fetch, the result still involves incinerating a hell of a lot of people).

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

COMBATING COMBAT *InFamous* has never been particularly lacklustre when it came to combat, but *Second Son* makes significant steps to improve both melee and range attacks to make it a far more competent third-person action title.

InFamous: Second Son is a game that's more than the sum of its parts. It has moments of pure wonder and excitement, as you, much like Delsin, come to understand the power that you wield and use it to carve your own path through the vividly conceptualised Seattle proxy. It's not the most outstanding open world, but it's one that features moments of unparalleled visual excellence. Whether a breathtaking climb up the Space Needle to absorb the full Seattle vista, or just watching the rain well and bounce neon reflections across the city streets, you can't ignore what a huge technical achievement *Second Son* is. If anything, it deserves a more accomplished game to back the spectacle.

This is a marked improvement on its predecessors, both narratively and gameplay-wise, and it's a huge amount of fun to play from start to finish. However, without trying to sound like a dick, it's a game much like its protagonist: absorbing until you come into contact with something more appealing.

VERDICT 7/10

A TRANSIENT THRILL THAT COULD DO WITH MORE POWER

NOT SHORT OF A FEW IDEAS

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes



DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Kojima Productions
PRICE: £29.99/£19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

We'll approach this from the end and work backward, and get the downside out of the way first, because, whether or not you're fully aware of how *Ground Zeroes* slots into Hideo Kojima's grandiose vision for *Metal Gear Solid V*, this eagerly anticipated return of Snake does most of what you'd expect of it, confidently refreshing the series' core mechanics, adding some much-needed narrative gravitas (and restraint) and blowing the tightly wound stealth antics wide open in a miniature sandbox that endures countless retreads. You'll emerge on the other side feeling that Kojima and his team have created something incredibly bold and entirely different to what has come before it. But, like the game itself, let's not waste any time getting to the end.

All the rumours are true, *Ground Zeroes* is something of an appetiser to *The Phantom Pain*, a gameplay experience (not counting the Side Ops) that clocks in at around two hours when played at a leisurely pace and much, much less for those who take a more aggressive stance to stealth ventures. And it's here that we found, once the seemingly endless credits had finished trickling down and we returned to the title screen, that just a mere 8% of the game had been completed. 8%? Clearly, *Ground Zeroes* is in denial. Yes, there's a handful of Side Ops missions that'll add a couple of hours to your gameplay experience, not to mention collectables to be scavenged around the world, but this is an undeniably meagre spree and whether or not it's worth the £20-£30 (depending on your format) is entirely dependent on both your perception of value and replayability.

But, and here's where things start getting better, once you do complete it you'll want to jump straight back in. This is where *Ground Zeroes* manages to hold firm despite its contentious brevity because what Kojima has created is an elegant and robust playground, both simply designed and densely populated. Your first run-through is as much about choreography as it is ticking off a list of objectives, and gaining an understanding of the land is as fulfilling a pursuit as achieving your mandatory goals.

MISSING LINK
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

INTEGRATED CHALLENGE While there's plenty of value in the Side Op missions, for the most party they could've been incorporated as optional objectives in the main mission.

Snake is dropped on the outskirts of Camp Omega, a Guantánamo Bay-style internment facility where *Peace Walker* alums Paz and Chico, who have been captured for nefarious (and convoluted) reasons, are kept. You're given a heap of audio logs and pages of backstory to trawl through for context, but it'll still perplex anyone who hasn't studied the *Metal Gear* timeline recently. The entirety of *Ground Zeroes* is set on this compact islet and you're given the freedom to explore it at your own free will and embrace various play-styles. Various routes branch off from

EVEN AFTER A DAY PLAYING THROUGH YOU'LL STILL DISCOVER NEW STRATEGIES AND IT'S POSSIBLE YOU WON'T SETTLE INTO A COMFORTABLE PLAY-STYLE UNTIL THE THIRD OR FOURTH PLAYTHROUGH

Below: There's a surprising amount of verticality to *Ground Zeroes*' landmass, with Snake able to climb the majority of structures in the base and use height to his advantage to scope out the area.



Above: Spotlights can be a problem, enabling enemies to see far greater distances. Soldiers on the ground also carry flashlights, which, again, means they can spot Snake from much further away than they could in previous *Metal Gear* games.



Left: You can just commandeer vehicles in *Ground Zeroes*. If you want to take a car or tank, it's a simple case of taking out the driver and jumping in.

JUKEBOX JOY

Using Snake's improbable iDroid device (that most certainly would not have existed in 1975), you can select through audio tapes, mission objectives and look across the entire map highlighting points of interest. However, one feature that we found particularly inspiring was the cassette player, which enables the player to listen to music. While to begin with these mostly consist of *Peace Walker*, we did find Richard Wagner's *Flight Of The Valkyries* and, in an inspired touch, you can set this to your chopper's arrival music. There's something deeply unsettling and incredibly exciting about hearing your chopper approach to the iconic theme before mowing down a series of grunts that have you pinned down in a position.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

1 MIN

You're dropped into Camp Omega and given your orders; to rescue Paz and Chico from the camp. How you then go about completing your objective, however, is completely down to you.

40 MINS

You've just picked up Chico and resisted the urge to throw him straight off a cliff. After the chopper picks him up and takes him to safety, it's now time to move on and get Paz out of there.

1 HOUR

You've now found Paz as well and you've also happened to alert the entire base to your presence. Why not grab a tank and just blow everything up? Yeah, that'll work just fine.

your starting point and Kojima has widely trimmed back bare landscape to ensure every direction is a viable option.

The base itself is buzzing with activity. Patrol guards constantly keep Snake on his toes, while passing vehicles and ill-treated prisoners create more immediate dangers as well as further avenues of exploration. You could jump into a passing vehicle and bulldoze your way through the map – perhaps fun for a quick jolt of excitement but somewhat missing the point – or, if you're feeling in a humanitarian mood, rescue other captives (some of whom contain intel).

Even after a day playing through you'll still discover new strategies and it's possible that you won't settle into a comfortable play-style until the third or fourth playthrough. That's a testament to how deep the systems and geography have been synthesised – like we said, this is entirely different to any *Metal Gear* that has come before it.

Outside of the main mission, the Side Ops are all worthy pursuits. Set within the same area, there's a few different mission types styled towards different tactical approaches. A mission to assassinate two priority targets is pure *Hitman*, utilising stealth and creative ingenuity to get the job done; while another involves the player picking off enemies from a chopper while escorting…well, we wouldn't want to ruin the surprise. More bite-size than the main draw and certainly enjoyable, we'd question whether Kojima could've just integrated the majority of these scenarios as optional objectives that could be completed in the main campaign. Still, it certainly puts the player's skill to the test in a multitude of ways and offers further opportunities to familiarise yourself with the way *Ground Zeroes* tweaks the original formula.

You'll notice that a lot has changed just in terms of the way Snake handles. The majority of the mechanics have been stripped

EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

Depending on whether you buy PlayStation or Xbox, *Ground Zeroes* comes bundled with two pieces of exclusive content. While we playtested the PlayStation 4 version of the game, the bonus Déjà Vu mission was locked and the series of objectives that have to be completed is quite the task. Still, it's certainly an amusing aside, involving Snake taking photographs to re-create events from the original game. On the Xbox One side, the Jamais Vu mission stars Raiden, who differs from Snake in speed and is tasked with killing a gang of body snatchers that can be detected through your binoculars. It's an action-orientated alternative for stealth players and, much like Déjà Vu, offers a silly alternative to the main game.

Below: Snake is pretty handy at locking picking. The trick is working out enemy patrols before busting a lock.





Left: You can call in a helicopter to offer some covering fire. Mostly, you'll just be using them to extract prisoners from the battlefield. You have a selection of pick-up sites, each with a risk.

Right: You can access your iDroid by hitting the options button or by tapping the DualShock's touchpad. The latter enables you to keep moving while studying the display.



Left: While you can steal vehicles, you can also hide in the back of them and let someone else drive you around. This comes in particularly handy with one of the game's later objectives.

back significantly since *Guns Of The Patriots*, which works both against and in *Ground Zeroes*' favour. There's no camouflage meter, which leaves a lot of skulking around in the bushes a matter of guesswork and a couple of other unnecessary gauges have been abandoned. Stealth is mostly effective, but there's a general fuzziness to the on-screen alert indicator that makes it hard to tell whether an enemy is close to detecting your presence or not. So while it is a step in the right direction in terms of making *Metal Gear* more accessible again, it lacks crucial refinement to be as effective as it should be.

Still, the added touch of simplicity is a welcome one and more often than not, it's implemented in such a way to enhance a more strategic stealth experience. One great example comes in the form of Snake's binoculars. Replacing the need for a traditional radar, Boss can use these to tag enemies and track them around the environment, even through walls. The only new addition that could be criticised for scaling back difficulty is the 'Reflex' function that, when Snake is detected, flips into bullet time and offers a short window to neutralise the enemy before other guards are alerted. It's not quite the shortcut to victory you might expect, as enemies can now spot you from further away now, but we can imagine it'll stoke the ire of purists (calm down – it can be switched off in the menus).

Above: As usual, you can subdue enemies and hide their bodies out of sight. Although, there's no convenient lockers to stuff them into this time around. Yet.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
The main campaign isn't long at all. We completed it in around 80 minutes on normal difficulty.

Q. WHAT ABOUT STORY?
The game has an opening and closing cinematic, the rest is left to audio logs and incidental chatter.

Q. WORTH THE PRICE?
That really does depend on how much you like *Metal Gear* and whether you're prepared to pay for a two-hour campaign.

IN MANY WAYS, GROUND ZEROES IS THE BIGGEST AND MOST CONFIDENT GAME THAT KOJIMA HAS EVER MADE

There are some other great additions as well that bolster the already meaty gameplay: subduing soldiers presents a few options, enabling players to interrogate enemies to reveal more about the map; while you can designate your own landing zone for your chopper and even use it to provide cover fire if you're in a particularly sticky situation.

This all contributes, much to Kojima's delight we imagine, to a game that feels effortlessly cinematic. Kojima has always had an affinity for some of Hollywood's greatest but has never really had the tools at his disposal to fully realise his vision of making a game that evoked a filmic sensibility. The most obvious change in this regard is the employment of the gravel-toned Kiefer Sutherland in the role of Snake, replacing the one-note David Hayter and the performance adds to a more mature production. Kojima capitalises on this, injecting visceral imagery and brutal drama into each of the two cutscenes (which serve to open and close the game) and you get the sense that the helmer is trying to rein in the franchise from the spiral of convoluted drivel that it found itself diving deeper toward.

In many ways, *Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes* is the biggest and most confident game Kojima has ever made, but you can't escape the fact that while it's certainly an immaculate world that has been created, it's just a small fragment of something much larger we've yet to explore. After the conclusion of the anticlimactic denouement, one that leaves plot threads dangling limply with no immediate resolution in sight, *Ground Zeroes* comes off like a particularly generous and expensive demo. While we're first in line for the final product, as it definitely impresses, this shouldn't be considered as anything less than a substantial and mouthwatering tease of a game that promises to be something very special.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

METAL GEAR WORLD There's a bunch of moderately dull challenges sprinkled throughout *Ground Zeroes* that can be used to compete against friends and strangers on global online leaderboards.

VERDICT 7/10
A TRIUMPH IN AMBITION, DISAPPOINTING IN BREVITY

FEARLESS, FUNNY AND FAITHFUL

South Park: The Stick Of Truth

Hilarious. There really is no other word. Despite its protracted and seemingly-troubled development time (including a late-game publisher switch), Obsidian's *South Park* RPG is a bold, daft and raucous love-letter to the Coloradan cartoon town it so meticulously recreates; as outrageous as the show in its pomp yet underpinned by the kind of solid mechanics that most licensed games rarely concern themselves with. And it's genuinely, fundamentally funny.

You play as 'the new kid', who has just moved to South Park and is immediately thrust into the snowy streets to find friends to play with. Quickly you're introduced to Cartman and pushed into the middle of a city-wide LARP, where the humans and Kyle's Drow Elves wage an endless war over the most prized possession of all, the Stick of Truth.

This spot-on parody of all things fantasy, be it *Lord Of The Rings*, *Game Of Thrones* or *Skyrim*, serves as the perfect dressing for a riotous tale that pulls in every *South Park* character you can think of, and takes you to places you probably couldn't. This is a game as committed to the kind of shocking 'surely they didn't…' humour that has served the show an incredible 17 seasons. And you can feel Trey Stone and Matt Parker's touch in every pixel and hear their unmistakable voices in every soundbite.

In *The Stick Of Truth*, South Park is offered up as an RPG overworld, letting you move freely around its low-detail 2D streets, bumping into familiar faces and hoovering up quests. It's quite an achievement – an incredibly faithful representation of the show's 'crappy' aesthetic in pin-sharp HD – and the characters move with that familiar two-frame wobble.

Almost all quests will get you into fights, initially with the Drow Elves that are hiding around the city, and later with all manner of foes that would be unfair to spoil. The battles – turn-based scraps – are probably a little light for those raised on thousands of *Final Fantasy* games, but still remarkably well-tuned for what could easily have been an afterthought. You, as The New Kid, or Douchebag as everyone in

DETAILS

FORMAT: 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DEVELOPER: Obsidian
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: Some of the gags and locales are retreads from the show, but there is a vast amount of original and hilarious gags. Perfect for fans and even for those who may have drifted away from the TV show. Right: The combat adds a layer of interactivity by demanding button-presses as specific times, to parry or add power to an attack. Special moves require QTE-style inputs.





DRESS UP

As Douchebag, your player-character, is a blank canvas, he can be dressed up in all sorts of fanciful garb. Some of the clothing choices are story-specific, but most of the time you can choose exactly how you want to dress, from the clothes on your back to the wig on your head. It's a surprisingly flexible system that actually allows you to dress your 6th Grader as anything from a beardy John Lennon-alike to a gasmask-wearing terror that looks like a miniature Paddy Considine from *Dead Man's Shoes*. With this being an Obsidian RPG, wearing clothing suitable for your class actually increases your output in battle. And if you're really fed up with how you look, there's always Tom's Rhinoplasty…





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
12 hours for the story, add another 3 for sidequests

Q. HOW'S THE STORY?
As madcap as the show at its best, never standing still for a minute

Q. THE COMBAT?
Not hugely deep, but very well built and genuinely funny.

town calls him, is joined by a buddy (Butters at first, but one of five well-known Park-lifers by the end of the game) and take turns to launch melee, ranged and character-specific attacks on your foes. Being an Obsidian RPG, there are all manner of status effects, buffs, dice rolls and item enhancements thrown into the mix, yet it never feels dry or overwrought. Somehow, these fights are as funny as the cutscenes.

In fact, all it took was the sight of a methhead hurling a broken bottle into Butters' innocent little face for us to have to physically pause the game to let the laughter subside. Little gems like this are joined by beautifully animated character-specific attacks, from Butters' own Professor Chaos screen-filling superhero, to Cartman's button-mashing fart-flame that engulfs his enemies in fire.

Farting actually becomes the game's most consistent through-line. Instead of typical magic attacks, Douchebag learns new and more elaborate ways to pass gas; eventually able to use his methane malleability to distract enemies, set-off explosions and even solve the riddle of Montreal in a truly superb trip to Canada. It's not Shakespeare, but you're a jaded soul if it doesn't raise a smile.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

COMEDY CENTRAL *The Stick Of Truth* pushes the envelope as far as the show does, and takes you to places you wouldn't believe. Makes us sad we didn't get to experience the scenes that were cut, though.

Of course, the beauty of *South Park* is that it's always far more intelligent than it ever lets on – only those who bother to watch the show or, now, play the game, are privy to the biting satire and sparkling wit. Obviously, the game's lengthy development time can't compete with the TV show's six-day turnaround, so the gags are less time sensitive. They're no less relentless though; every inch of the game mined for humour, and as flawlessly acted and scripted as you'd expect. Criminal, then, that Ubisoft chose to censor two specific scenes (with seven cuts in total, offering text descriptions instead), crushing what would have easily been some of the game's best jokes and treating its audience like children for no discernable reason whatsoever (especially as the PC version is uncut). The official reasoning is 'a market decision', which is like being told 'because I say so' by your parents.

Thankfully, the volume of comedy in *South Park: The Stick Of Truth* manages to survive; there are still hundreds of laughs to be had. The game's story is over in around ten hours, but what might seem short for an RPG makes perfect sense here. Some fluffy side-quests aside, *The Stick Of Truth* is lean and sharp, and the better for it. It also manages to throw in some puzzling to mix up the pace and ensure the battling doesn't get too repetitive.

THE BEAUTY OF SOUTH PARK IS THAT IT'S ALWAYS FAR MORE INTELLIGENT THAN IT EVER LETS ON



Above: Many of the sidequests highlight classic characters but amount to little more than fetch-and-grab busy work. Thankfully, they're completely inessential to all but the most hardened of completionists. **Left:** The frame-rate is a little choppy, but the visuals are spot on, pin-sharp and authentically crappy.

Certain quests evolve into 'dungeons' of sorts, with keys to find and bosses to vanquish. Here, you'll have to use the powers and abilities to gain on your travels to unravel Rube Goldberg-style environmental conundrums. Sometimes it might be as simple as throwing a ball at a vent cover, other times it might be finding the power switch on a torch to kill a giant bat. These systems can also help you avoid combat by killing enemies before you make contact with them. None of it is hugely taxing, but it's clever, inventive and enjoyable.

What a tremendous piece of work *The Stick Of Truth* is. Uproariously funny, outrageously offensive and underpinned by genuine gameplay from a team that's been honing its craft for decades. Sweet.


VERDICT 9/10
A HILARIOUS, BOLD AND COMPLETELY LEGITIMATE RPG

Above: Alas there's no split-screen co-op mode for the Xbox 360 version, which given the frenetic action is perhaps just as well.

PRE-SEEDED BY ITS REPUTATION, POPCAP BRANCHES OUT

Plants vs. Zombies: Garden Warfare

It may plump for an inviting over-the-shoulder perspective, but make no mistake; *Garden Warfare* is one of the first truly meaningful attempts to create a sophisticated first-person shooter for the preteen market. The colours are garish and every trinket is awarded alongside a moreish zip and a bang, but none of the depth of its most prominent inspiration has been sacrificed. This is *Battlefield* in a babygro.

And yet it isn't merely a simplification of *Battlefield*, but a softening. Enemies are "vanquished" instead of killed, your deaths are never listed on the post-match score sheet and levelling up your classes is a process so brisk that it's possible to unlock most of the important stuff – for every class – in the space of a single match. There's no radar (annotations appear above your enemies when they're too far away to attack you) ammunition is unlimited and there's no sprint command or melee attack, but these modifications hamper nothing. Play still revolves around balancing your classes, maintaining control of each map's bountiful election of choke-points and assisting (as well as communicating with) your team whenever possible.

The comparisons to *Battlefield* (and *Battlefield 4* in particular) may seem ludicrous on the surface, but they're entirely apt. There are pathways and entrances that are only accessible by specific classes. A few pieces of destructible scenery prevent sneaky sideward passageways from unbalancing the combat. AR Drones are giant bulbs of garlic, claymores are potatoes and shields come in the form of newspapers and toilet doors. In short: all of the mechanics and tools you'd expect to find in a contemporary military shooter are present here too.

There's even Boss Mode: an approximation of *Battlefield 4*'s Commander Mode, which is compatible with both SmartGlass and Kinect. Although it's ostensibly the same thing, Boss Mode doesn't compel in the same way simply because your arsenal has been completely neutered. You may be able to raise teammates from the dead – if you stockpile the required number of battle points to do so – but airstrikes and health boosts are so underpowered they are all but pointless. If you have a compatible tablet handy it's reasonably diverting as a pass-the-pad co-operative option, but it's unquestionably trounced by the (always welcome) inclusion of split-screen co-op.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
DEVELOPER: PopCap Games
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-24
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

NONE OF THE DEPTH OF ITS MOST PROMINENT INSPIRATION HAS BEEN SACRIFICED. THIS IS BATTLEFIELD IN A BABYGRO

FAQs

Q. IT IT DIFFICULT TO LEVEL UP?
Quite the opposite. You can unlock valuable tools simply by using weapons; you don't even need to hit things with them.

Q. IS IT ON PS4?
At the time of writing it's a Microsoft exclusive. But you should definitely expect that to change.

Q. CAN ANY CLASS PERFORM REVIVES?
Yes. You can revive a teammate regardless of what class you are, but only Sunflowers and Scientists can replenish health.

Left: One minor irritation in multiplayer is the fact that player names are very poorly highlighted. So if you hear a friend call for help and the situation is particularly chaotic, you're going to have your work cut out trying to find them.



Right: The Frostbite 3 engine will never again be put to more vibrant use – unless we see a sequel.

Below: With practice, the Chomper plant is devastating. It can sneak underground before emerging to land a brisk, one-hit vanquish.

The weapons are broadly comparable to the carbines and sniper rifles of most online shooters and they handle in precisely the same way here. You'll have to methodically feather your trigger if you want to maintain accuracy from a distance, and nailing a moving target demands that you take all of the expected variables into account. The game allows for this degree of precision because it runs like the absolute clappers: it may not reach the desirable 1080p or 60fps, but play is almost impossibly smooth on Xbox One. This isn't the best-looking game in history, but when you're facing off against twelve enemies at once, Microsoft's new machine never buckles under the weight of it, not even fleetingly.

The only real issue with the package involves the wholesale lack of content. Launching at a budget price point may seem like an unnaturally savvy move, but EA has merely been sensible: a budget title is precisely what this is. This is largely because weapons and environments are both in perilously short supply, and you're hungry – for new maps especially – after barely four hours of play.

In addition, there are just three game types currently on offer. Gardens and Graveyards is a very smart amalgam of Conquest and Rush, Team Vanquish is the obligatory deathmatch set-up and Garden Ops is a frankly terrific rendition of *Gears of War*'s Horde mode, which gives an obligatory salute to the series' tower-defence origins. Thankfully only in Gardens and Graveyards does the lack of maps actually become a problem; the other two modes are small-scale enough to subsist on cut-down chunks of the larger areas.

Play is further embellished by the Sticker Shop, a post-match marketplace in which you can exchange a lump sum of in-game currency for a randomised pack of assorted doodads. Some of these items are purely cosmetic – a moustache for your Engineer here, a wizard's hat for your Sunflower there – but others gift you with a raft of strategic options during objective-based matches. You can plant gadgets like turrets and health beacons when you're defending, or summon AI minions when you're attacking. The latter system works so well for two reasons: because there's nothing more satisfying than a well-orchestrated distraction, and because – as is the case with *Titanfall*'s NPC grunts – their weakened health and lack of smarts allow less skilled players to have fun too.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

CREATIVE ASSAULT It might not be seismic, but the lack of a melee attack ends up being invigorating. Brilliantly, it forces you to get creative with the rest of your arsenal.

In addition to being mechanically sound – as mechanically sound as any online shooter you could possibly compare it to, genuinely – it's also remarkably charming. The soundtrack is chiefly comprised of toe-tapping, off-kilter lounge jazz; every character boasts a set of nonsensical soundbites that you'll be inanely repeating to yourself in no time; and being senselessly mown down by a sunflower that's grinning from ear-to-ear somehow manages to zap all of the stress out of it.

Whether PopCap is able to capitalise on these stellar foundations remains to be seen. Younger audiences may be captive for the moment – what competition is there, after all? – but seasoned shooter fans are perpetually spoiled for choice, and the lack of new weapons and environments is destined to grate on the player in record time. But for now, as is, this most unusual and unexpected of franchise spin-offs is thoroughly and unexpectedly wonderful.

BOUND FOR THE DOWNLOAD

Garden Warfare's Sticker Shop is currently bereft of intrusive microtransactions, but that situation might only be temporary. Brian Lindley – one of the game's producers – has been quoted as saying that micropayments might emerge at some stage down the line, if "player feedback and metrics" demand them. As it stands today, it's brazenly obvious that in-game purchases would completely unbalance things. Here's hoping that PopCap resists the urge entirely.



VERDICT 8/10
A FLYWEIGHT BRUISER – BUT A BRUISER NONETHELESS

THESE BOOTS ARE MADE FOR RUNNING

Strider

Cast your memory back to the original *Strider* and the strangest thing about it is that Strider himself didn't really run. He walked. Strider marched through an army of cyborgs, slashing them in half with his sword, cartwheeling and flipping onto new pathways above, maintaining a lethal momentum right through to the end credits. But at no point did he ever really take flight. He just… well, he walked.

The 25 years that have passed since Strider's debut have seen that momentum interpreted as speed, and so *Strider* 2014 is a hyperactive beast, with Capcom's ninja whipping along at eight times the speed of the original. Creaky bones and expanding waistline be damned, time hasn't slowed him down, as Double Helix has given *Strider* an injection of pace that ensures it belongs with the more modern takes on 2D platforming and moves on from the slower, more considered original outing.

What does slow *Strider* down is the new metroidvania-style structure at the heart of this reboot, putting this closer in line with *Strider*'s NES outing than the arcade original. Often the speed and the structure work hand in hand. There's a guide that points out where your next objective/exit/switch/necessary-object-interaction is located but you don't have to pause the game to access it, as it's onscreen at all times – a small touch but ensures momentum is never broken. Each level is dotted with collectibles but there's also a clean line that takes you through with minimum fuss, allowing you to progress if you're strong-willed enough to ignore the glittering secrets that tempt you into different areas of the level.

Strider isn't as dense as *Shadow Complex* or *Guacamélee!* in this regard, nor does it prompt the same sort of head-scratching confusion as the tricky design of those games often did, but picking the bones clean on each map remains strangely compulsive as you unlock new segments, new sections and ultimately, new powers to play around with.

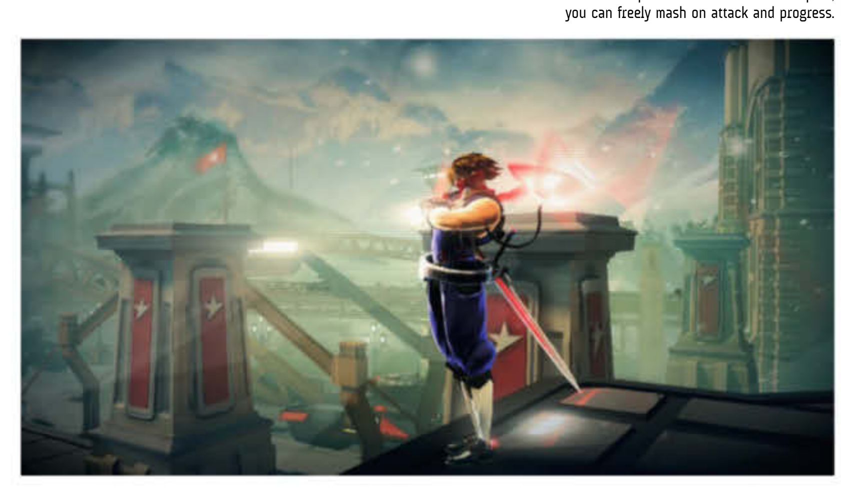
And what a joy those powers are to use. They all tie in with classic *Strider* (with a slight nod to the abilities seen in *Marvel vs Capcom*) and nudge the combat from humdrum territory into a spectacle of orbs, panthers and hawks. The enemy design is fairly smart, in that they'll obstruct you just enough to demand you explore your powers, as you work your way around shields, gun turrets, sticky grenades and homing rockets. It's balanced beautifully – you almost always have enough meter to use your powers to overwhelm the enemy, and so despite having to quickly stop and adjust to enemy formations and patterns, momentum is never stopped and rarely slowed.

Despite the increase in speed and new level design, the spirit of *Strider* 1989 remains

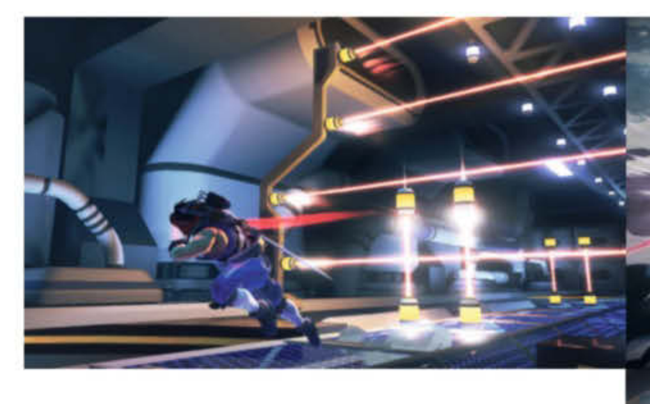
DETAILS

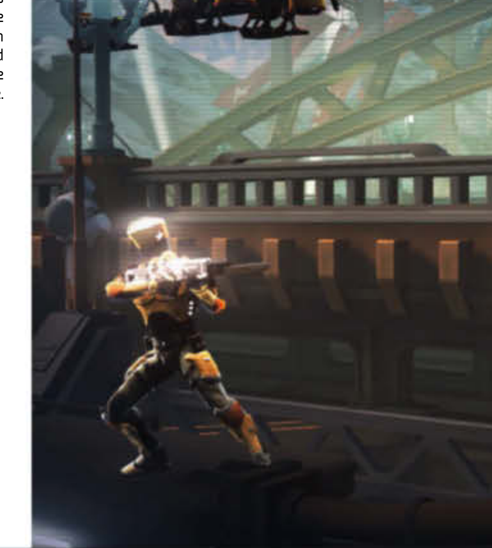
FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PS3, PS4
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Capcom
DEVELOPER: Double Helix
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Right: Bosses are the biggest disappointment in *Strider*. For all the skills and abilities you unlock, they fail to match your new capabilities and besides some obvious boss patterns to observe and respect, you can freely mash on attack and progress.



Above: You can unlock different costumes throughout but sadly they're little more than palette swaps and don't fundamentally alter the core gameplay experience.





Right: One nice touch to the visuals are the arcade scanlines that run throughout, a nod to *Strider*'s arcade heritage.

STRIDER 2014 ISN'T A GAME BUILT FOR STERN CHALLENGE OR INTENSE BOSS BATTLES. IT'S BUILT ENTIRELY AROUND SPEED





FAQs

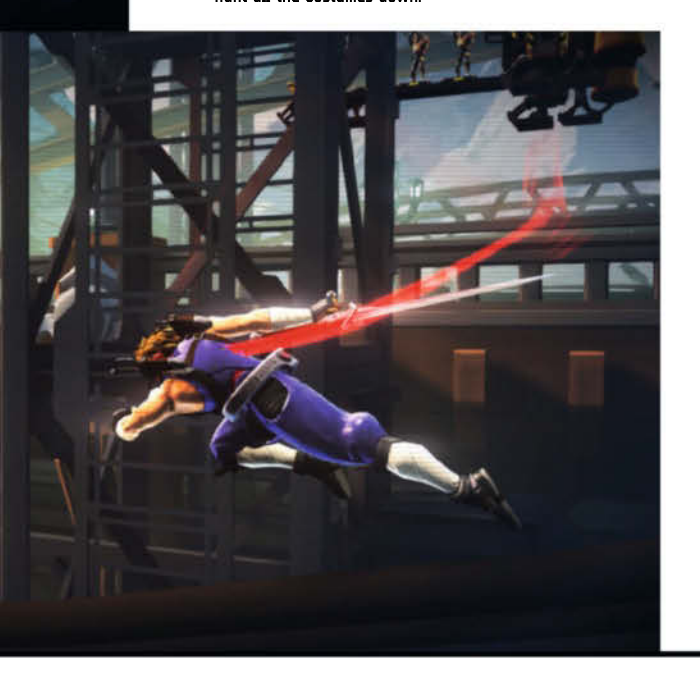
Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO COMPLETE?
Around six hours on your first playthrough, with an achievement for those who complete it under four.

Q. IS IT TOUGH?
Not really. The powers you unlock are enough to overwhelm almost every enemy in Strider.

Q. IS THERE ANY MULTI-PLAYER?
No. Hard difficulty and improving your completion time (plus collecting all the secrets) are your reasons to return.

BATTLE SUITS

One of the most intriguing screens in *Strider* is the costume select one showing 12 unlockable costumes. What's more, despite expecting the worst from Capcom and everything being locked off as DLC, all of the outfits can be unlocked during the game. At least, that's according to those playing *Strider* – we only managed to uncover three during our two playthroughs, making them the hardest secrets to find. While it's pleasing that the bonus costumes can be unlocked in-game, the one disappointment is the lack of impact they have on the gameplay. These are aesthetic touches only, so it's a nice bonus for completionists but there's no real incentive to hunt all the costumes down.



intact. This is still a game about momentum and using that momentum to complete levels as quickly as possible. It's no surprise then that what this modern reboot has in common with previous *Strider* outings is that the most satisfying stretches are those where Strider can run freely, slashing an army of cyborgs in half. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

It's a shame that having done so well in recapturing the spirit of the original *Strider* and the iconic sense of momentum that carried the ninja through each level, the vibrant look has been swapped by Double Helix for a drab colour palette stuffed with endless tones of grey. Besides the red-scarfed ninja himself, who flings his bendy body around obstacles and enemies with sideways cartwheels and neon sword slashes, there isn't a shred of personality to be found.

It sounds like the sort of fluffy complaint that doesn't translate to a problem in gameplay terms but each level ends up an identikit mush of metals and greys, leaving *Strider* 2014 leaning on the level design to motivate the player to keep going far more than it should have done. That the level design is strong enough to bear that burden is testament to how well Double Helix has constructed each map.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FORCE FEEDBACK Combat is solid but the one vital component it's missing is feedback. You don't quite get the sense that your blows are landing against tougher enemies, especially bosses.

Not that the gameplay escapes without fault. The biggest issue throughout *Strider* is that the bosses aren't fun to fight, providing neither a refreshing gameplay twist nor an adequate challenge of your learned skills. Running at bosses while mashing attack dispatches almost every boss early on, with later bosses doing the bare minimum to nudge you away from such mind-numbing tactics. It's an odd oversight that's only partially corrected when later in the game, Double Helix reintroduces tougher variants on bosses you have already fought but by that point, the sense of wonder and surprise has gone. This might be the only game where standard grunts can prove to be a bigger challenge than the bosses are.

Even so, *Strider* 2014 isn't a game built for stern challenge or intense boss battles. It's built entirely around speed. After all, this is a game where the only metric tracked by the leaderboard is how long it took you to complete it and there's even an achievement for getting to the end under four hours. *Strider* fans and speed-run aficionados will get the most out of this but for everyone else, this is a solid, fast-paced platformer that never lets the pace dip long enough for you to become too bored.

VERDICT 7/10
DESPITE A FEW FLAWS, THIS IS A FAST AND FURIOUS REBOOT

TRIALS, TRIBULATIONS, TOP HATS AND TALL TALES

Professor Layton Vs Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

This marriage of two of the DS eras most enduring stars has been a long time coming, having first appeared in Japan back in 2012. The reason for the delay becomes as clear as the Prof's signature top hat after the game's elongated prologue, though. This is a videogame with a hell of a lot of text. Reams and reams of text. Thankfully, the always-consistent translation team fills the endless dialogue with wit, charm and colloquial spirit. It tells a tonally askew crossover tale where Professor Layton collides with Phoenix Wright in a case of a young girl who's accused of a crime she may or may not have committed.

The story is hacked in two, with sections dedicated to classic Layton puzzling and picture-prodding and others entirely focused on Phoenix's high-energy courtroom melodrama. The clash between the pair is a little jarring, but such is the pedigree of both series that it manages to hang together. Ostensibly, it's a *Phoenix Wright* game taped to a *Layton* adventure, but as you play through the story, their worlds begin to cross.

When Espella Cantabella appears on Professor Layton's doorstep in some distress, she drags our co-stars into a supernatural mystery that probably fits better in Layton's world but has just enough criminal intrigue to fit Phoenix's. As Layton and Luke solve puzzles to work out just what has happened to Espella, Wright defends her vociferously in the courtroom, yelling at witnesses and annoying judges just as he always does.

Anyone familiar with either series will know what to do straight away. The Professor's puzzles are as thoughtful and confounding as ever, drawing in some of *The Azran Legacy*'s 3D artwork but eschewing that game's more open, free form approach to storytelling. This is defiantly linear stuff; a slave to its story and, oddly, probably the least ambitious version of either of its stars' games in years.

Not that it makes it any less enduring. Watching Layton give that famous point to camera when you've cracked a puzzle is as satisfying as ever. The day cutting through a witness's testimony in Ace Attorney stops being a rush, it's probably time to retire from videogaming. In fact, it could easily be argued that Layton's leisurely puzzling is a more enjoyable way to split up Wright's courtroom scenes than his standard investigation-and-interrogation.

It's too wordy for its own good, and the clash of styles is sometimes jarring and somewhat nonsensical, but this blend of two classics maintains enough quality from each to be well worth investigating. A thoroughly enjoyable and engaging crossover.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level 5/Capcom
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: March 28
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: VIRTUE'S LAST REWARD



WORSE THAN: PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE AZRAN LEGACY



Below: By stripping out Phoenix's investigations, the courtroom scenes lose a little power, but they're still as dramatic/hilarious as ever. Playing as Layton between trial scenes is more enjoyable, anyway.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TEXT ADVENTURE: The sheer volume of chit-chat is exhausting. It's well-written, thankfully, but still far too wordy. And God forbid you fail a court-case – you'll have to read it all again.



VERDICT 7/10

OVERLY VERBOSE BUT UNQUESTIONABLY CAPTIVATING



Above: Layton's sections are largely linear, with the classic search for hint-coins and story-furthering puzzles the only order of the day. It's familiar but entertaining fare.







Left: Swallowing different enemy types lets Yoshi perform different tasks. Most are just projectiles, but he can also spit melon seeds, breathe fire and even fly. There are always a surplus of eggs when you need them, too.

NINTENDO REVISITING A CLASSIC? WHATEVER NEXT?

Yoshi's New Island

If there's a more pleasant videogame than *Yoshi's New Island*, then it must be tucked away in a sunny corner of Sesame Street being guarded by kittens and cupcakes, because we haven't seen it. From the minute you first hear ramshackle opening title music, seemingly played on broken kazoos and squeaky toys, you're in for an affable platforming adventure that feels like a leisurely stroll on a summer's day.

Once again, you take control of a variety of Yoshis as they transport a wailing baby Mario around a gorgeous 2D landscape, leaping across platforms, swallowing baddies and chucking eggs at clouds. It's a stunning game; every inch crafted with love and affection and every pixel meticulously placed. It's not a daunting affair. Unlike recent 2D platform hells like *Super Meat Boy* and last month's *Donkey Kong Country Tropical Freeze* on Wii U, *Yoshi's New Island* is a warm breeze of a game, never troubling to the experienced ledge-leaper but with just enough tension to stave off boredom.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: March 14
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Unsurprisingly, it's filled with ideas. Quite how Nintendo's teams keep mining the 2D platformer and coming up with new gems is a mystery, but here we have all sorts of smart setpieces, be they giant eggs that smash through scenery or Yoshi's counterfeit doppelgangers that ape his moves and have to be carefully guided into spike traps.

Keen to showcase some of the 3DS' unique features, too, *Yoshi's New Island* sometimes turns its titular hero into a vehicle (hot air balloon, submarine, drill) and asks you to manipulate him through a time-sensitive maze by tilting the 3DS to steer. Of course, any time you're asked to adjust the angle of Nintendo's latest portable, the 3D effect is lost, as is most of your visibility, so this is a game far better suited to having the 3D slider set to 'off'. Thankfully, you lose none of the clarity or style of the visuals by doing so.

FINGERPRINT

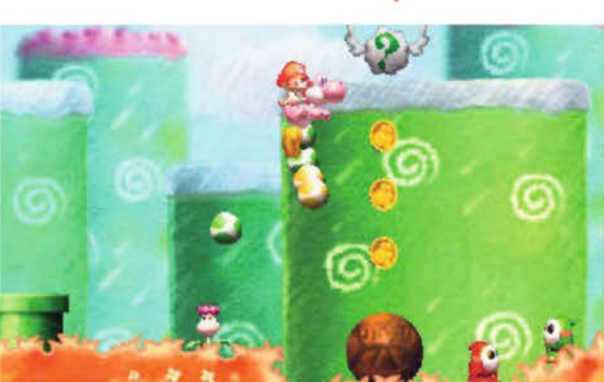
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

HAND CRAFTED *Yoshi's Island* has always had a vibrant art style, but here Nintendo has really excelled itself here with gorgeously etched crayon backgrounds and characters.

A two-player minigame mode joins the party, letting you and a friend tackle simple yet amusing tasks that are unlocked as you progress through single-player. They're little more than a side dish, though, to *Yoshi's New Island*'s delightfully simple main meal. Eventually, the simplicity and relative ease does place Yoshi's New Island just beneath the recent classics of the genre. This won't be as timeless as *Super Meat Boy* or *Donkey Kong Country Returns*, and nor does it ever reach the seemingly untouchable heights of *Super Mario World*. Nevertheless, there's nothing not to like. A reliable and friendly romp through another beautifully built Nintendo world, and yet another great reason to own a 3DS. It's the machine that keeps on giving.

VERDICT 8/10

SUMPTUOUS, LOVEABLE AND WARM. A PORTABLE HUG



Above: The one disturbing element of *Yoshi's New Island* is Baby Mario's caterwauling when you take a hit. As always, you must capture him before running out of time.



DESPERATE IS PERHAPS THE MOST SUITABLE WORD WE'VE FOUND TO DESCRIBE DARK SOULS II SO FAR

SPEED RUN

After finishing the game and getting our asses kicked by New Game+ for a while, we decided to reroll a new character and see just how quickly we could race through the opening section. The answer turned out to be a resounding 'pretty damn fast' – knowing where the early secrets are, what class works best and what route to take saw us cover about four hours' worth of first play ground in just shy of 20 minutes. With a little more practice, we'll be ready to be downing bosses and speed-grinding our way through, which feels almost as good as initially overcoming the horrible trails that lie in your path.





WHEN LOVE AND DEATH EMBRACE

Dark Souls II

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Bandai Namco
DEVELOPER: From Software
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Left: They might look imposing and they sure hit hard, but learn their patterns and these guys are surprisingly easy to slaughter. You're well rewarded for your bravery, too.

Do yourself a favour: don't use a wiki when you play through *Dark Souls II* for the first time. Granted, we didn't have the luxury of that even being an option, having been among the first outside of From Software to reach the credits, but that feeling of accomplishment is something we wouldn't trade for any number of missed swords, Covenants, secrets or locations. It is the very antithesis of modern gaming – a game where so little is explained that blind experimentation and daring exploration are the only ways to slowly get a handle on this dismal world and its occasionally equally dismal mechanics. Resign yourself to the fact that you *will* miss stuff on your first run and everything you do manage to find will come as its own minor victory. With so much mystery drenching almost every single aspect and area of the game, it seems almost disrespectful to From Software to simply follow in the footsteps of brighter, bolder adventurers. Carve your own path, die a hell of a lot and work the game out for yourself. Trust us, you'll be glad you did – played this way, there's still nothing else on the market like a *Souls* game.

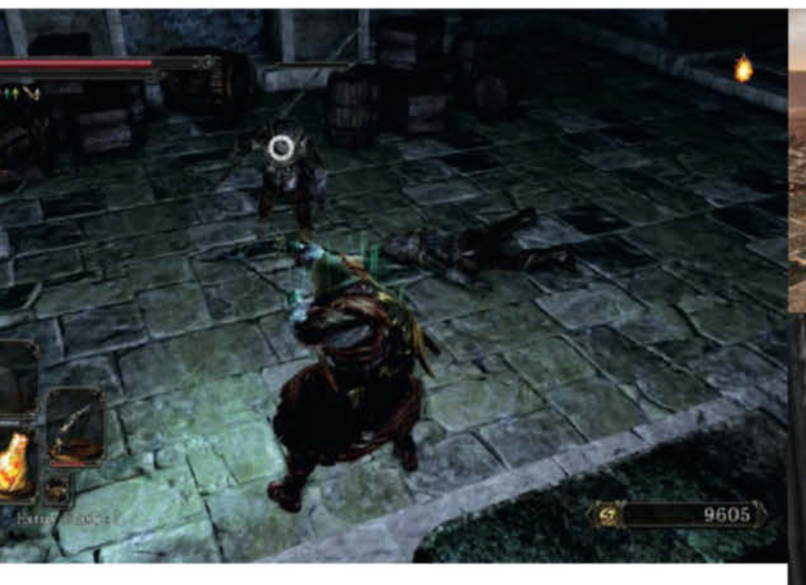
Structurally, the lauded open layout of *Dark Souls* returns but with even more freedom to tackle things however you see fit. There's still a 'recommended' route through large chunks of the game, although you'll need to interpret health bars and enemy patterns for yourself rather than be told outright that you're out of your depth. And that's the best thing about it – once you have a solid grasp of the mechanics, you never really *are* out of your depth. There's even more emphasis here on MMO/MOBA staples such as kiting and pulling well in order to avoid being wildly outnumbered, with typically simple AI sometimes making this feel a little cheap. One particular area highlights this better than any other, largely as it's the first point at which such tactics go from beneficial to necessary – the door to the Bastille's barracks. Charge in and you're looking at up to seven grunts at once but get clever with ranged attacks and movement and you can pick them off in slightly more manageable groups of two or three at a time.

No matter how strong and skilled you may be, you never feel safe – with packs and bottlenecks this common, groups of even the most basic enemies can make short work of those who lack the necessary patience and caution. This is a fact in which From Software clearly delights, with various areas throughout the game dealing in quantity rather than quality of opposition to make you really scream when you get axed in the spine by a Hollow grunt you've killed countless times before with just a single hit. Every encounter must be read and reacted to quickly, making it even more important than ever to have a selection of offensive options on hand. But with one melee, one ranged and one magical option filling your three primary weapon slots, you should have all bases covered. Provided, that is, your fingers are fast enough to switch between and utilise the three properly in the heat of battle.

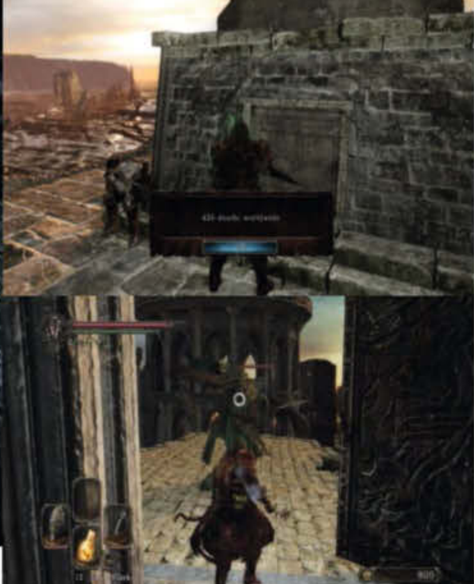
ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

REFINED Stats and progression have been tidied up quite a bit – drop rate is no longer tied to Humanity (which doesn't exist) while many things work in the opposite way to how they used to.

With *Dark Souls*' old three-tier weight system effectively prohibiting equipping gear beyond your most basic needs, it's good to see that From Software has fiddled with that mechanic in order to better empower adventurers with the tools they need. Encumbrance is still an important consideration but the numbers are more generous and the scale more dynamic – get close to 80 per cent load capacity and you'll see that horrible slow roll that kicked in at over half weight in *Dark Souls*, with various quicker brackets as you shed pounds of unnecessary gear. It's slightly more lenient



Above: Most bows scale with DEX but they can still be used by any class that meets the stat requirements. This one actually scales with STR, making it a perfect secondary tool for a warrior.





Left: Tackle enemies on their own patch and you'll likely lose. Lead them off to somewhere that gives you the upper hand instead.

than its predecessor in this respect, but it's just about the only aspect that is.

It used to be that you could bang your head against an easy area for hours and slowly rack up a huge collection of souls with which to level up or buy/improve your gear. But no longer, since enemies don't just keep coming back like they once did. Run an area too many times and enemy numbers will start to dwindle, to the point where it's actually possible to farm an area to extinction. This means that both souls and enemy drops are in limited supply, so making the most of what you have (through luck-boosting items and preserving the souls you do manage to acquire) is absolutely crucial. Nothing is missable due to this – New Game+ brings everything back, as does burning a new item that refreshes an entire area while increasing its difficulty – but it does prevent long-term grinding, almost in direct response to the number of people who used *Dark Souls*' forest of invisible assholes to quickly and easily boost to higher levels.

Similarly, other aspects seem to have been altered directly in response to speed run videos and such high level play. Parrying, for instance, was risky enough in the last game, but at least the brave could benefit from a free critical hit for risking everything. Here, though, no such luck. Now it's only good for interrupting longer combos and given how risky it is, you're generally better off using Stamina to roll out of harm's way or block, shield permitting – there's little benefit to the parry outside of the fact that it still makes you feel like a badass despite being basically pointless. Fast travel too is no longer tied to the Lordvessel or any similar MacGuffin, now it's possible from any of the campfires you have unlocked along the way. It's useful, sure, but things can really get daunting when you're exploring multiple areas at once and don't know which of them – if any – is the right way. Oh, and Estus too: you don't get quite so many uses of the regenerating potion as you once did, although thorough exploration can take it up to and beyond its familiar capabilities.



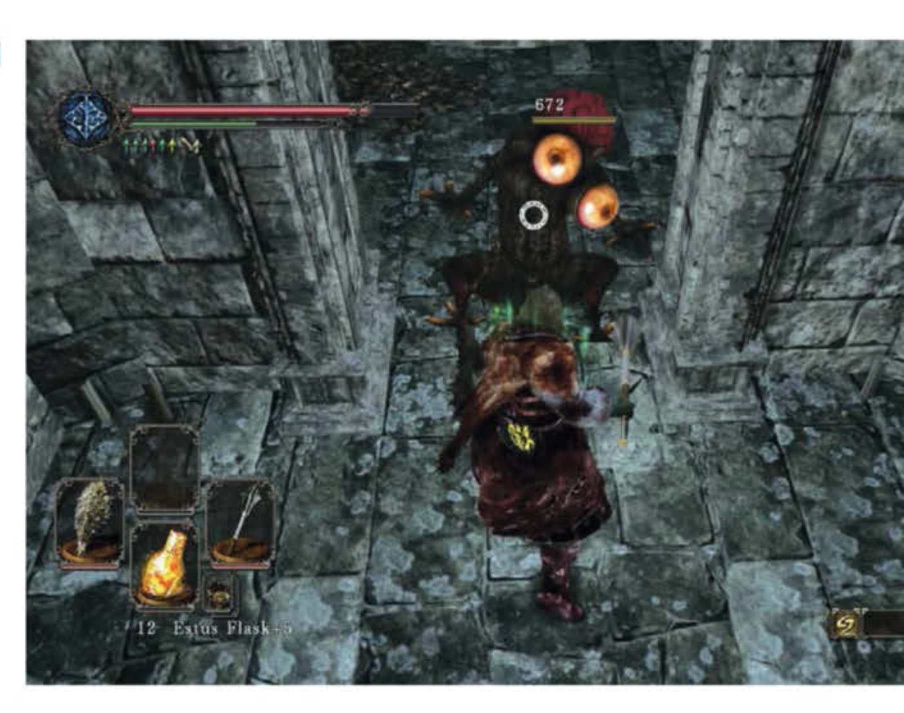


FAQs

Q. HOW MANY TIMES DID YOU DIE?
309 in total which, across 60 hours of play, isn't too bad at all. Five per hour? Yeah, we'll take that…

Q. GOOD BOSSES?
Sure, there are some great ones. There are lots more bosses than the original, though many follow similar templates.

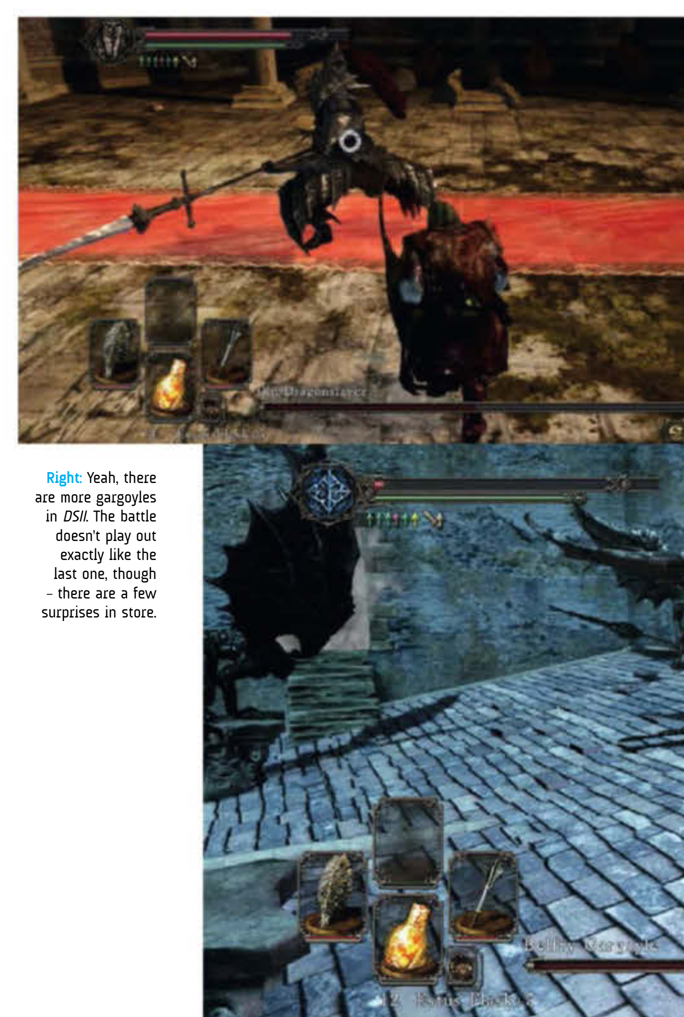
Q. IS IT CHEAP?
It can be, but not nearly to the extent that the original footage made it look. Most tricks, traps and attacks *can* be avoided, if only just.



Right: Gear isn't only good for stats – some stuff you'll find yourself using purely because it looks amazing. That's perfectly respectable.

As much as the grunts can (and will) smash you to bits, this is a boss rush game first and foremost and as such, it'd have been nice to see some more interesting opposition in the early stages. The first boss encounter doesn't come for a good few hours and, even then, both it and the few that follow are all fairly similar affairs. It helps ease you in before the more complex big dudes come out to play, sure, but *Dark Souls II*'s increased boss count means there are a lot more forgettable encounters than there were in previous games. Things certainly pick up later – and there are some genuinely superb boss battles waiting for the dedicated – but where once mist gates meant something genuinely amazing was about to happen, here it's all too often just another oversized man with a longer sword or spear.

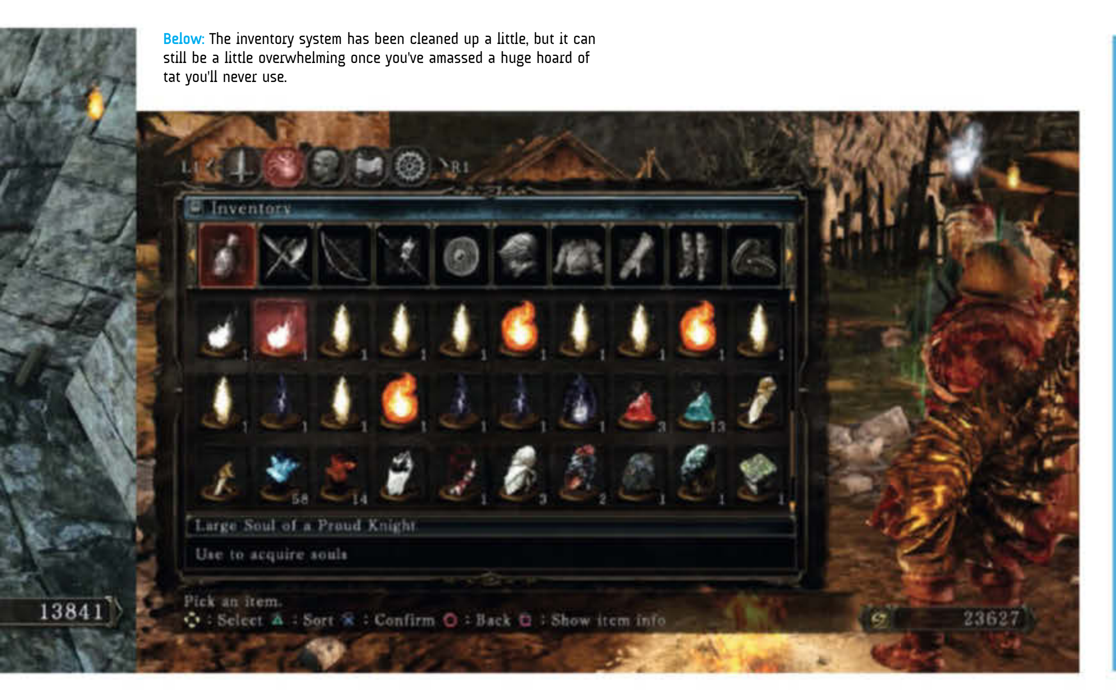
Online play has been given a radical overhaul, a new selection of Covenants and server-based (rather than the former



Right: Yeah, there are more gargoyles in *DSII*. The battle doesn't play out exactly like the last one, though – there are a few surprises in store.

NO MATTER HOW STRONG AND SKILLED YOU MAY BE, YOU NEVER FEEL SAFE

Below: The inventory system has been cleaned up a little, but it can still be a little overwhelming once you've amassed a huge hoard of tat you'll never use.





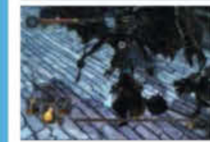
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

30 MINUTES



Still haven't died yet. Not having a great big Asylum Demon in the way from the start helps, but the intro to the game is just easier than the original.

10 HOURS



Died lots now, over and over again, but exploring is still awesome. Feels more open than its predecessors once you get beyond the first few areas, too.

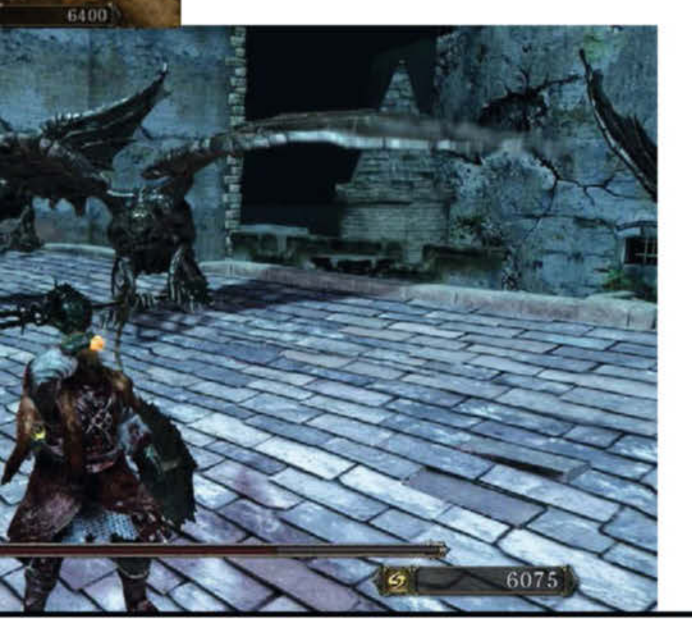
50 HOURS



Nearly done, but still so much you've probably missed. Backtracking is only half the battle, too – some of this stuff is going to be impenetrable until the wikis get going.

FRIENDS AND FOES

The ambitious multi-threaded multiplayer of *Dark Souls* proved too much for its peer-to-peer connectivity to ever really handle. But true to pre-launch sound bites about how dedicated servers would bring out the true potential of the Covenant system, multiplayer moments are both more frequent and more stable than before. With a new set of focused groups to join and represent, it's far clearer from the off what your chosen online goal is, be it being called in to defend those being invaded, protecting key areas of the game, indulging in honour-based PvP or just making life worse for everyone else. We won't see the full extent of how well online works until people have started to max out Covenant devotion and use their rewards for doing so online. But from our limited early experience, it at least seems like a step up.



peer-to-peer) connection making invasion an even more pressing concern. Almost an expectation, in fact, given the ability to properly clear areas of enemies, although once again, the more complicated (or just trolling) Covenants seems harder to track down than the sporting and cooperative ones. There are even concessions to make playing with friends easier, albeit at the cost of a ring slot or two – though we prefer messing with (or being messed with by) randoms rather than friends. You should never feel safe in this horrible place and even though there's no guarantee friends would have your back, the dim hope of a random stranger coming to your aid is far more desperate – perhaps the most suitable word we've found to describe *Dark Souls II* so far.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

HARDER With improved online mechanics, expect to get invaded a lot more often than before. And for all kinds of new reasons too, but we'll let you figure those out for yourselves…

Yes, desperate situations present themselves almost by the minute, and they never stop coming. A mistimed swig from your flask; one sword swing too many depleting your Stamina gauge; opening a chest only to see a row of teeth around its rim… In these moments, buttons get wildly smashed in a last-ditch shot at survival, which seldom works but good luck letting the facts come between you and frequent panicked trips around the controller. It's longer and somehow harder than its predecessor, but without making things too cheap in the process. Weapon degradation and single, isolated individuals for levelling and powering up are just the start of this, with far more coming when you reach New Game+. Rather than just getting slight HP and damage boosts, enemy waves are usually changed up – additional foes, powerful red versions of standard enemies and roaming Black Phantoms all make life hellishly difficult, making levelling before leaving your first run absolutely essential.

Despite so many slight changes here and there, the solid combat, janky platforming, overwhelming odds and brutal bosses all conspire to remind you that this is very much a *Souls* game, and yet another excellent one at that. People will argue at length about the hierarchy of the three games but for now, all we can offer is the fact that *DSII* definitely deserves its place beside them – an exact order of quality will have to wait until the community is established, the wayward secrets found and the wiki updated. When you're done with your first horrible run through *Dark Souls II*'s desperate world, *then* you have our blessing to abuse the hell out of that wiki. Just don't ruin the surprise and have someone else constantly tell you where to go and what to do – you might as well be playing *Assassin's Creed* if you do, and that's not really the point.



STILL DAMN TOUGH, STILL DAMN GOOD

MARTIAL ARSE

Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z

Above: Brutal executions can be chained together once the requisite upgrade is unlocked, allowing you to boost your score and charge the bloodlust meter that provides you with temporary invulnerability.

With a propensity for violence that would make Tarantino blush, a penchant for outrageous spectacle over systemic depth and an affinity for crass humour mixed with innocent slapstick, *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* is almost a parody of itself, displaying a near postmodern self-awareness of the low brow tendencies on which its appeal is predicated.

Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z is aimed at the secret meathead in all of us, at that part of our brain that resents all the hard thinking it's been made to do and that just wants to mash buttons to make the zombies fly. *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* often scratches that itch beautifully. This game is not, nor is it intended to be, an action game in the mould of a *DMC* or *Bayonetta*, but it is a game that allows you to pull off large combos and spectacular executions with relative ease, and to find a certain satisfaction in doing so.

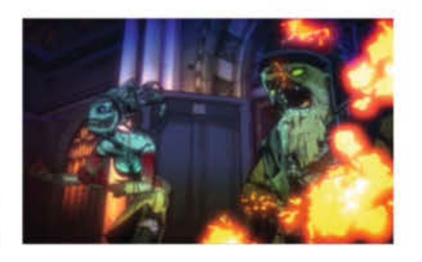
DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Tecmo Koei
DEVELOPER: Team Ninja
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Combat in *Ninja Gaiden Z* is based around three weapons – a chain 'flail' attack, which favours range and speed over damage, Yaiba's fist, which is slow but powerful and his sword, which is somewhere in between. Weakening your undead enemies allows you to perform ostentatiously violent executions in order to boost your score and regain health. When it comes to the game's standard enemies, little to no thought has to be employed by the player when it comes to mixing up your attacks – any combination of wild button mashing will do. That there is simplicity to *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* (at least in the early going) and that it prioritises style over substance does no harm to a game that successfully generates enjoyment from the act of clearing the screen of an undead horde.

More powerful enemies are gradually introduced – from psychopathic clowns to giant two-headed babies – not only to ramp up the difficulty level, but to introduce new tools and mechanics to play with. Execute one of these enemies and you'll receive access to

YAIBA MAKES YOU WANT TO BITE YOUR CONTROLLER IN HALF AND SMASH YOUR HEAD THROUGH THE TV

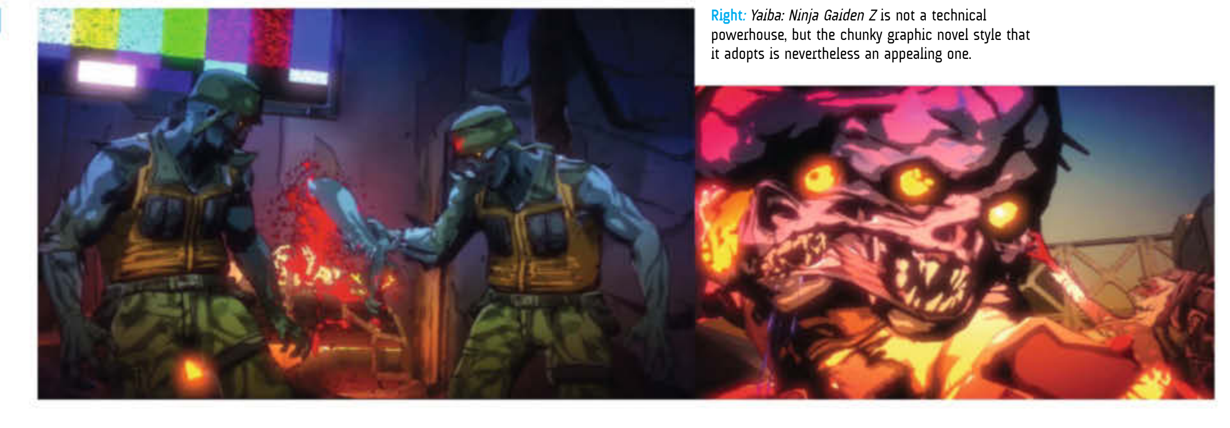


FAQs

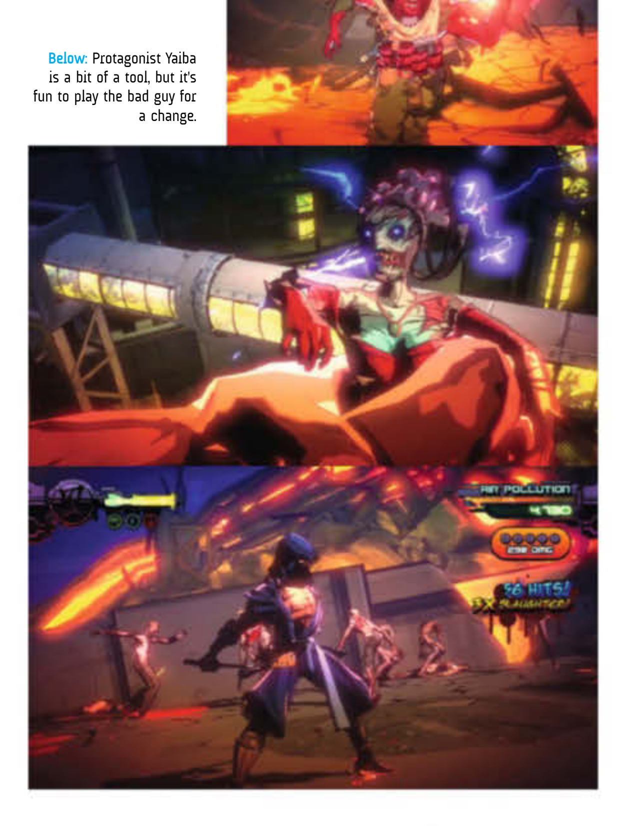
Q. IS THE STORY THOUGHT-PROVOKING?
There are zombies and cyborg arms and giant babies. Don't be silly. It's bloody stupid and you know it.

Q. IS IT FUNNY?
When it comes to the jokes, not so much. The zombie slapstick is often genuinely funny, though.

Q. CAN YOU UPGRADE YAIBA'S ABILITIES?
Yes, you can use XP to unlock more combos, extend weapon usage and reduce elemental damage.



Right: *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* is not a technical powerhouse, but the chunky graphic novel style that it adopts is nevertheless an appealing one.



Right: Grotesquery is definitely the order of the day when it comes to *Yaiba*'s enemy design.

Below: Protagonist Yaiba is a bit of a tool, but it's fun to play the bad guy for a change.

CUTTING A PATH TO HIGH-SCORES

At the end of every combat encounter you undertake in *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*, you'll get yourself a medal rating your performance in that particular fight. At the end of the level, these medals are totted up and weighed against medals awarded based on how many collectibles you found, how many times you died, and so on, giving you an average rating for the stage. As such, if you find that *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*'s combat clicks with you, there's potential for replayability in going back to try and get higher combos and perform more executions.



a degradable weapon, many of which have elemental affiliations that interact with each other in different (though often explosive) ways. Fire some bile from a 'hag pipe' at an electrical enemy, for example, and they will be frozen in crystal, allowing you to smash them into pieces with Yaiba's fist.

In principle, that sounds like a nice idea, a clever way of introducing a tactical element to the game's combat, but it's here we reach the crux of the problem with *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*. As the game progresses, developer Team Ninja evidently felt – and you'd be inclined to agree – that the game needed more challenging enemies and a few extra mechanics to keep it from degenerating into a borefest once the novelty of the zombie meat grinder wears off. The issue that the game faces is that the technical implementation of those additional facets does not serve to make the game more interesting, but instead turns it into an exercise in frustration.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

DODGY CAMERA It's often hard to tell where your character is in more chaotic battles. Giving the player control of the camera or better telegraphing the player's position could have been the answer.

As you progress into the latter half of the game, you will regularly find your screen littered with an array of powerful enemies, as well as crowds of elemental and standard zombies, and it's in these situations that it becomes apparent that the prospect of playing around with different weapons and the possibilities proffered by combining elements in a way that turns the odds in your favour doesn't match up with the reality.

With enemies teleporting left, right, and centre, fireballs, electrical beams and other projectiles being thrown at you from all directions and a variety of enemies trying to grab, slash or punch you, the screen can get busy. Add into the equation one or two spectacular but distracting electrical storms (caused by electric and fire elementals coming into contact) and a fixed camera that often obfuscates where you are being attacked from and the game becomes visually bewildering. As the act of spotting where your character actually is (never mind who's attacking you) amongst all the chaos develops into an increasingly regular feature, *Yaiba* becomes infuriating. The game transforms from being one that gently indulges the whims of the meathead inside you, into one that draws it out into the real world, making you want to bite your controller in half and smash your head through the TV.

In all other aspects, *Yaiba* is less objectionable, if decidedly unremarkable. There are QTE-like platforming sections that we're loathe to refer to as gameplay and simple puzzles that usually involve throwing whatever zombie is in the area at whatever obstacle is in your way. Complexity is not what this game is aiming for and in providing a small distraction to the combat that makes up the meat of the game, these platforming and puzzle sections just about suffice.

That the same cannot be said for the combat is a real shame because, and this might seem odd to say for a game as brash and distasteful as this one, there's something endearing about the way that *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z* knowingly panders to our base instincts, from its combat, to its gloriously silly zombie slapstick vignettes. However, lacking the mechanical meticulousness to deal with its more difficult sections as it does, *Yaiba* ceases to draw an easy satisfaction from the chaos, as it does in the early going. In the process, it becomes less of a game and more of an anger generator – that's anything but a recipe for fun.

VERDICT 5/10
ENJOYABLE SILLINESS RUINED BY ON-SCREEN BUSYNESS

THE GAME THAT MARKETING BUILT

The Lego Movie Videogame

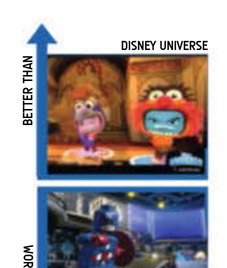


Above: There are a couple of bizarre yet entertaining rhythm-action sections wherein the people of Bricksburg – Emmet's hometown – break into dancing. Almost everyone bar Batman is pretty high on life.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC, Wii U, PS Vita, 3DS
ORIGIN: United Kingdom
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER: TT Games
PRICE: £37.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: DISNEY UNIVERSE



WORSE THAN: LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES

It's business as usual in Camp Lego, although this time around the charm has been lost somewhat. It was bound to happen; after all it's remarkable that Lego games are still performing so well on a critical and commercial level. Unfortunately though, this tie-in feels a little lacklustre and seems, for want of a better word, lazy.

The game's sense of humour never comes into question, and the graphics are at the level you'd expect them to be on PS4. It's all a miasma of luminescence, in particular a section based in a bright, rainbow-flavoured cloud city where you meet the Unikitty, an impossibly cute kitten/unicorn hybrid. It's all so twee and so lovely that it's difficult for anyone to level any serious criticism at it, but underneath the pearlescent sheen is a game that feels sterile and rushed.

The typical Lego gameplay is still present, although the formulaic approach of this entry stands out against TT Games' extensive back-catalogue. The usual platforming and puzzle ratio is in place, although everything seems simpler. There's nothing inherently wrong here, it's just that, in light of the game existing purely in the interest of synergy, it feels as if TT has dumbed down its usual flair and churned this game out as purely a marketing product and nothing more.



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

REPETITION: Unfortunately, *The Lego Movie Videogame* reaches its peak around halfway through, and so we would've liked to have seen some more interesting dynamics come into play later on.

That said, it is still an entertaining marketing product that – in lieu of experiencing the game's source material at the time of writing – has turned us on to the movie it accompanies. What TT had at its disposal for the first time was unprecedented access to the source material that it hoped to emulate, and so the gameplay is interspersed with genuine footage from the movie, moments that prove to be one of the game's major highlights. This helps to drag the simple narrative along, but the real entertainment value lies in the characters themselves.

We have the likeable, wholesome protagonist Emmet along with a multitude of notable figures from history and pop culture, inserted into the game to provide adult players with a few ounces of satire. Batman is arrogant. Abraham Lincoln flies around on a rocket chair. Although the game is aimed at children, the jokes that fly around from start to finish hint at TT's real understanding of the medium.

The astute nature with which TT augments the template of its games by crafting a carefree tone is admirable and detracts from the simplicity of the overall product. This is underbaked, then, but still worth playing if the opportunity arises.



Above: The Lego environments are lovingly realised, and they all look suitably sharp on such a powerful machine. Every piece of every area is rendered entirely in Lego bricks, which is enough fun to play with in itself.

VERDICT 6/10
A SLIGHTLY LAZY TIE-IN WITH A SENSE OF HUMOUR


1945. THE EASTERN FRONT.
THE WAR IS OVER.
ALMOST...
"SENSATIONALLY GORY"
OUTPOST III
RISE OF THE SPETSNAZ
18
OUTPOST III
ON DVD MARCH 31
amazon.co.uk
e one
Free Super Saver Delivery and Unlimited One-Day Delivery with Amazon Prime are available on eligible orders. Terms and Conditions apply. See Amazon.co.uk for details.
Packaging © Entertainment One UK Limited 2014. All Rights Reserved.

THE RESULT OF 30 YEARS' REFINED CRAFT

TxK



PURE MODE 00206500 MAXIMUM BULLETS

Above: Our favourite power-up is the 'max bullets' boost. If you get this, you can basically hold down X and just sweep across whatever shape you're playing on, holding back the relentless waves of enemy drones.

Imagine getting one of the old Atari arcade cabinets – specifically, one with *Tempest 2000* in it – shrinking it down and then shoving it all inside a Vita. Give it a shake, throw in some pulsing neon madness, touchscreen controls and gyroscopic compatibility and you have *TxK*. Jeff Minter's latest is the result of 30 years worth of industry knowledge, and you can really, really tell.

Where *Tempest* had you glued to one edge of a plane and shooting down oncoming foes in a fairly repetitive and placid environment, *TxK* sees the levels you play on evolve and change as they go forward – some are simple shapes; boxes, diamonds, lemon curves, the Taurus symbol, while others are shifting shapes that can get very confusing very quickly if you're not paying attention. If you mess up, no worries – your progressive stats are saved.

TxK is one of those games that can sit on your Vita forever and you won't get bored of it. The hectic nature of the game and its limitations to score-attacking or survival modes make it a fairly transient experience – you don't want to sit down to *TxK* for hours at a time: it's a game that's better played in small bursts, a refreshing and functional break when you need a breather from that 100-hour RPG you're slogging through.

If you do fancy a marathon sit-down with *TxK* though, you can play through 100 levels of utter colourful madness. The whole game feels like an acid flashback taking place in the basement of a Brighton nightclub – the vector-driven art style and clinical geometrics of the game are fleshed out and brought to life with a colour palette that'd put even *Rez* to shame (and on the Vita's OLED screen, it's eye-wateringly sharp). Supported by a wry sense of humour and a thumping, clubland soundtrack, *TxK* feels like a concentrated slice of the Nineties rave scene reimagined for a handheld console.

The Vita is the perfect platform for *TxK*, too – it couldn't exist anywhere else. The touchscreen can be used to trigger a smart bomb that'll wipe out all onscreen enemies, with double score granted for any foes taken out. Tilting the Vita also steers you into pulsing corridors of light-show madness between levels and alters perspective on the planes themselves.

TxK is a wonderful game, and something that will appeal to players that want an experience that makes the most of the Vita's hardware. It's clearly a Llamasoft game, but it's refined – dropping the ego that Minter has been accused of letting take over recent releases. *TxK* is Minter's best game: an experience that understands its form, and takes great pleasure in letting you know that.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: England
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Llamasoft
PRICE: £5.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — SPACE GIRAFFE

WORSE THAN — GEOMETRY WARS 2

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BACK ON TRACK While *TxK* makes great use of a lot of the Vita's features, the back touchscreen is somewhat neglected – we'd like to have seen this used for maybe another power up.

VERDICT 8/10
FULL OF CHARACTER, COLOUR AND CRAFT. BUY IT

Below: If it all gets a bit overwhelming and enemies start encroaching on the flat of your plane, jumping allows you to get some breathing space and rain bullet hell down on the foes that are keeping the pressure up.







Left: In a game all about killing big monsters, we're glad to see *Toukiden* shows strong and stylistic enemy design – waiting to see what new demons can be killed is part of the game's addictive quality.

DON'T HATE THE SLAYER

Toukiden: The Age Of Demons

The *Monster Hunter* formula has really taken off in Japan – for a while, the game was a system seller for the PSP, and the franchise has continued to go from strength to strength on both the Vita and the 3DS. In the wake of the let's-get-together-and-hunt genre's rocketing success, many other studios have hopped on the bandwagon in an attempt to emulate the success of Capcom's new cash cow.

A lot of these attempts have been fairly transparent; *God Eater* (and its sequel) is like an anime-styled tribute to *Monster Hunter*, whereas Keiji Inafune's *Soul Sacrifice* falls at the opposite end of the spectrum, opting for the brutal, gothic fantasy theme. *Toukiden* falls somewhere in-between, and feels like the final step in cementing the *Monster Hunter*-alike as a solid genre in and of itself.

The premise is paper thin, and honestly, that's all it needs to be. You play as a hero that is sent to the village of Utakata – which is humanity's last line of defence against invading Oni forces – with explicit orders to protect and serve. That's all you need to know. The rest of the game just finds excuses to throw you into recycled arenas to hunt Oni, big and small.

Helping you in this task are the powerful souls of deceased warriors (obviously) who materialise in the form of Mitama – equippable entities that bestow a range of abilities on your character. Each Mitama provides different passive skills as well as different abilities mapped to the face buttons of the Vita, and keeping an eye on which abilities are open to you is vital for taking down some of the higher level enemies.

Once you've been playing for a while, everything starts to get a bit formulaic, but therein lies *Toukiden*'s charm – it's rough around the edges, the sound and graphics aren't particularly impressive, but it all still somehow *works*. It's dangerously playable – even if you shut your brain off to the endless slaying of Oni you'll be doing, you'll still find it fun – larger enemies can have their limbs lopped off, and smaller enemies get flung around the arena with satisfying ease once you learn how to properly wield each of the five weapons (each makes the game play very differently; a credit to the title's longevity).

Local or online multiplayer can also be implemented if you've got friends that are interested, but your AI partners are more than capable of filling in if not. The game isn't particularly difficult, but it is long (some battles can take up to 45 minutes if you're poorly equipped); an enjoyable but overly familiar time sink.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Omega Force
DEVELOPER: Tecmo Koei
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: DYNASTY WARRIORS NEXT



WORSE THAN: SOUL SACRIFICE

SYNTHESIS

BRINGING GENRES TOGETHER

ROLE-PLAYING TAME *Toukiden* makes no allusions as to what it's trying to do, but we reckon that if you could somehow tame the Oni you fight and get them onside, the RPG elements might be bolstered a little bit.

VERDICT 6/10

A DYNASTY WARRIORS PEG IN A MONSTER HUNTER HOLE



Right: While the overall graphical fidelity of the game is nothing to rave about, some of the cutscenes will have you marvelling at your Vita.

JOHNNY, DON'T POINT THAT GUN AT ME

Rambo: The Video Game



Above: It's a shame that Stallone's most convincing performance as an action star is the weakest part of the game. Not that it could have been represented by much else under the circumstances, but the ceaseless parade of QTEs only serves to highlight the game's lack of ideas.

Rarely has such preconceived apathy been so heavily ranged against a game as it has with *Rambo.* Perhaps it was to be expected given that here we have a title based on a trilogy of movies that in spite of being seminal in terms of their influence on early shooters, are about as necessary a focus for videogame revival as those based around the films of Stallone's Eighties arch-rivals. Worse still, we have a first-person rail shooter that drearily leads players through the three first movies (but not the fourth), breaking cover only to indulge in multiple serial QTE abuses. Little wonder, like poor little misunderstood Johnny in *First Blood*, the game came under assault before it had a chance to explain itself.

The trouble is, having now played *Rambo: The Video Game*, it's hard to muster any enthusiasm for it beyond that it's a rare breed and in that context does a decent job of representing the narrative of the movies. Almost every set has been rebuilt and every scene you can probably remember – plus a fair few you can't – are given a run-through, either as a brief cut-scene, pitched battle or quick-time sequence. Unfortunately, none of them are particularly interesting, save for the fact they slavishly copy the source, meaning the most memorable will be those you enjoyed watching on VHS rather than replaying here.

Aside from a prologue set in 'Nam that lets you loose off a few rounds, almost the entirety of *First Blood* is a quick-time sequence that barely seems to last ten minutes before you've taken revenge on Sheriff Teasle. In contrast, the second movie is a relative epic, as wave upon wave of identikit Viet Cong run into view just to be mowed down. It's only when the game reaches Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, the weakest of the movies, that the game boasts moments of genuine enjoyment, as the arsenal of weapons is expanded, previously earned perks kick in and the variety of enemies opens up to offer a more distinct set of challenges.

Because the entire game is scripted, requiring only reaction button presses in response to on-screen cues, it's easy to conclude that the game's many issues stem from genre choice, but in truth the presentation lets it down more. Cut-and-paste character models, with misshapen limbs and dead eyes, together with inconsistently sampled audio, combine to provide a experience that frequently feels cheap and in places is just downright nasty – a VHS knock off when, in this day and age, you would at least have expected a DVD remaster.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PS3
ORIGIN: Poland
PUBLISHER: Reef Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Teyon
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

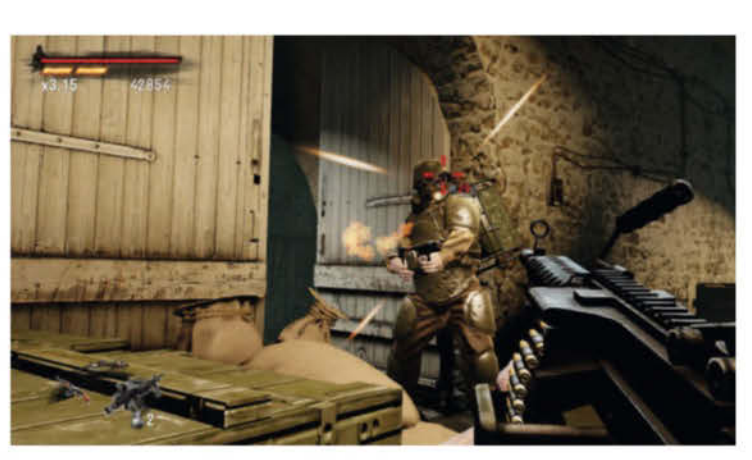
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BEARD FORCE For a straight-to-videogame, it would have been better served by a straight-to-video licence behind it, perhaps one made famous by the likes of Chuck Norris or Van Damme.

VERDICT 4/10
IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN CHUCK

Below: Very occasionally innocent civilians will rush in front of your sights during transition movements, which is usually a cue to reload rather than fill them full of holes since running out of ammo at the wrong time will often be followed by a restart.

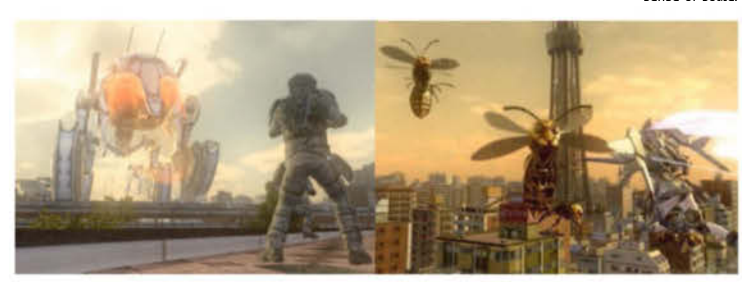




"I'M FROM BUENOS AIRES, AND I SAY KILL 'EM ALL!"

Earth Defense Force 2025

Below: The incidental dialogue is by turns informative and amusing. Details of the invasion from elsewhere lends the action a sense of scale.



***Earth Defense Force 2025* is exhausting. In one sense that's a positive: the action is bewilderingly chaotic, offering such sustained intensity that you'll be grateful for the downtime between each wave.** On the other hand, its 80+ levels of relentlessly explosive destruction eventually becomes wearying. Like your enemies – the invading Ravagers and the insects, arachnids and robots they spew onto the battlefield – Sandlot's sequel doesn't quite know when to quit.

It's more expansive than 2007's *EDF 2017*, with three new character classes accompanying the bog-standard ranger units. These grunts are the ideal choice for newcomers, while the Wing Divers – an airborne class which uses jet packs and energy weapons – offer a very different angle of attack. The other two are best saved for multiplayer battles: Air Raiders can call in missile attacks, summon vehicles and deploy shields, while the Fencer is a walking tank, carrying four weapons instead of two. The latter's controls make it harder to master, though in the hands of experienced players, it's the most devastating offensive class.

As with its predecessor, *EDF 2025* feels like a descendant of arcade classics like *Robotron* and *Smash TV*; perhaps lacking the taut design of those games, but offering a similar brand of frantic yet surprisingly strategic action. Though some of its design wrinkles feel accidental – the warning to take care when firing explosive weapons lest they blow you up probably stems from the likelihood of an AI-controlled ally wandering into your crosshairs – it's rarely a game where you can simply staple down the fire button and hope for the best.

It's still rough-hewn, of course, but knowingly so. Its B-movie voice-overs, struggling to be heard above a cacophony of shrieks and bangs, are delivered with a wry wink, the dialogue never knowingly fromage-free. Buildings collapse as if constructed from papier-mâché, while frame-rate drops add to the ramshackle feel, the engine chugging under the weight of everything Sandlot throws at you. Oddly, it only adds to the sense of drama, the feel of a game that's overwhelmed by how much it's asking of itself.

That thrill of unpredictable chaos is amplified when enjoyed with a friend or three. Online it's like a hybrid of *Monster Hunter* and *Dynasty Warriors*, the joy of a co-operative takedown against impossible odds combined with the obsessive-compulsive satisfaction of wiping all the red dots off the radar. It's best not to binge, since its repetitive nature quickly palls over longer sessions, but *EDF* has never been quite as spectacular, nor as charmingly wonky, as this.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: D3 Publisher
DEVELOPER: Sandlot
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN



EDF 2017

WORSE THAN



MONSTER HUNTER 3 ULTIMATE

WORLDWIDE

TAKING GAMING ONLINE

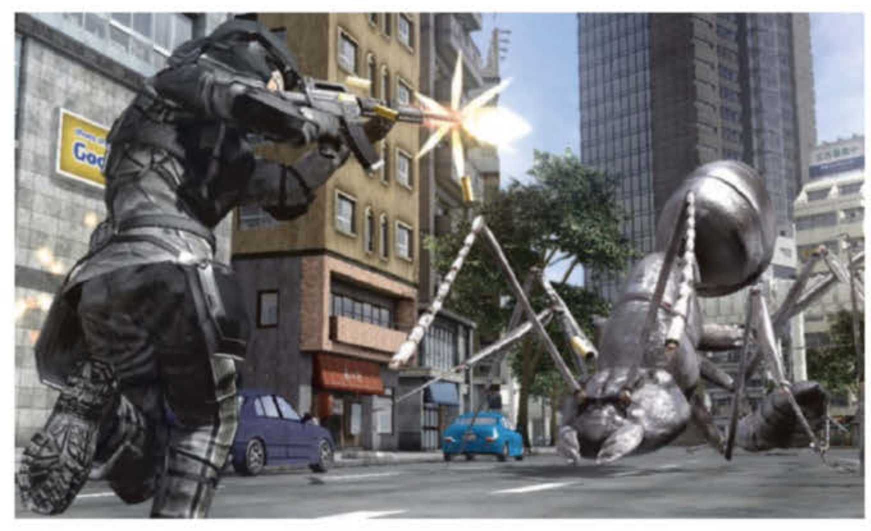
EDF ENERGY: Invigorated by its four-player online mode, some surprisingly solid netcode makes for a relatively lag-free multiplayer experience. Teamwork is crucial on the higher difficulties.

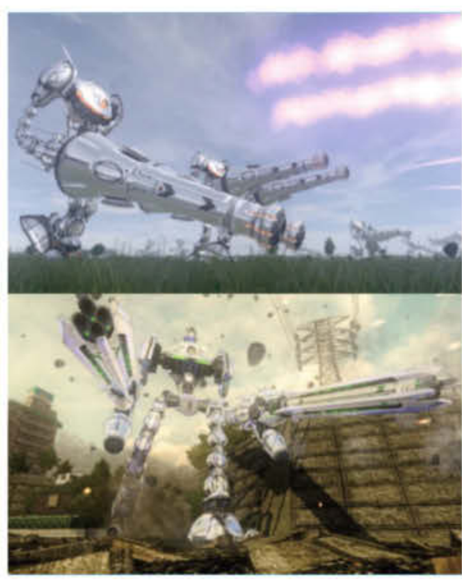


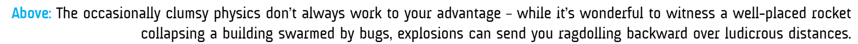


VERDICT 7/10

BIGGER, BETTER, MORE BAD ANTS







Above: The occasionally clumsy physics don't always work to your advantage – while it's wonderful to witness a well-placed rocket collapsing a building swarmed by bugs, explosions can send you ragdolling backward over ludicrous distances.

BLITZKRIEGING ITS WAY ONTO CONSOLE

World Of Tanks: Xbox 360 Edition

In the past a lot has been made of the gulf between PC and console-based gaming. Where once the PC gamer was either admired for their knowledge and commitment to the medium or in fact derided for the very same reasons, nowadays the self-professed 'master race' does appear to have the best of everything. More power, a better life span, more exclusives, sheer variety in terms of software – the PC has it all.

It's therefore rather impressive when we are treated to something such as this; a game that has 'PC exclusive' written all over it that, through advances in development and some damn good business sense, has made it onto XBLA and near enough represents the full article. Sure, certain concessions have been made, but *World Of Tanks* is an ever-growing product and an impressive – if slightly late – coup for the aging Xbox 360. In fact, we'd go as far as to say that it's a match made in heaven.

World Of Tanks blends shooting, driving and MMO sensibilities to create a haven perfect for those that steer clear of the FPS market but aren't against murdering other digital individuals. Although it seems strange to compare a third-person tank battle to a jaunt on a close-quarters FPS, there is more than a touch of *Counter-Strike* here amid the armour-piercing shells and squeaking tank tracks.

There are the frenetic qualities available in more mainstream first-person shooters, and yet there is a hint of a far more considered approach – interesting, given the title's seemingly all-encompassing target market. Like in Valve's timeless online shooter, there is a very limited variety of game types, favouring pure skill over an affinity for gimmicky modes. At present, the only game type available is a straight-up deathmatch that hosts 15 players per team, and the optional Tutorial mission offers you some key advice, from using foliage as camouflage to sticking cruise control on and enjoying some mobile bombardments.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: N/A
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: Wargaming West
PRICE: Free
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 2-30
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



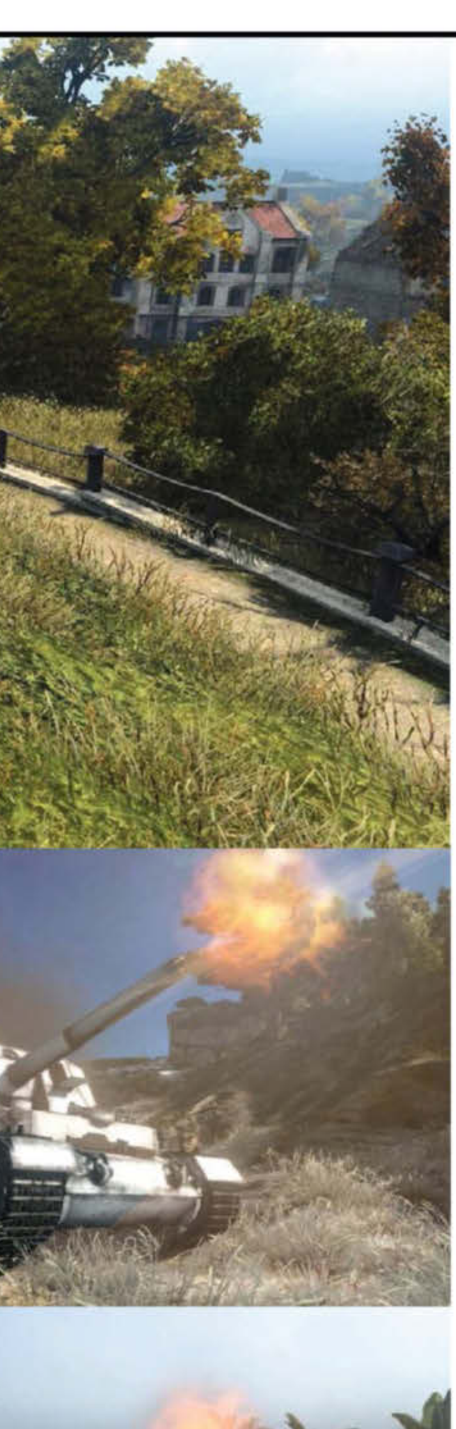
Above: You can buy several custom paint jobs from the Garage. These are 'rented' out, as you can opt for a week or a month's use out of them. Below: The German Tiger, one of the most fearsome machines to feature in WWII. They're fearsome in the game, although it'll take you a while to grind out enough XP and Silver to obtain one. Unless you fancy spending some real cash...





ABSOLUTELY TANKED

Much like the PC version of *World Of Tanks*, this Xbox 360 version offers a wealth of upgrades and research paths for players to use. When you have researched and paid for a particular vehicle it will magically materialise in your Garage for use in battle, and from then on you are welcome to upgrade to your heart's content. Like before, there are separate currencies that accomplish different things, such as Silver, Gold (paid for with real money), XP and Vehicle XP. Getting to grips with the research tree is key to getting the full experience out of the game, so set your sights on that terrifying King Tiger you're after and start grinding away.



BETTER THAN

WORLD OF WARPLANES





JUST LIKE

COUNTER-STRIKE: GLOBAL OFFENSIVE

FAQs

Q. ARE THERE MANY MICROTRANSACTIONS?
Only if you go looking for them. If you're against them, they shouldn't intrude too much.

Q. CAN I CHANGE SERVERS?
Of course, there are several servers available, although we'd recommend you stuck to your local one to avoid latency issues.

Q. WILL IT BE UPDATED?
Without a doubt. This is a game that will evolve and grow as time wears on, provided its consumer base remains strong.

As ever, the abyss separating this version of *World Of Tanks* from its PC forebear takes root in the game's visuals. Although the tanks have been lovingly, expertly rendered, environments and other models have not received the same treatment yet. It may be early in the game's life on Xbox 360, but it suffers from a dull palette and ambiguous environmental design.

Still, this isn't ever going to be a game for graphics connoisseurs, and the real focal points for any online shooter are the standard of gameplay and the nourishment of the competitive streak running through its consumer base. In terms of the former, *World Of Tanks* holds up well. The general appeal of a game of this type is reflected in the elegant and simple control system, where you use the left analogue stick to accelerate or reverse, the right stick to rotate your vehicle's turret and the right trigger to unleash fiery death upon your enemies. Holding down the left trigger sticks you into a highly useful sniper mode, and the face buttons allow you to utilise additional items such as repair kits and fire extinguishers.

The system is so simple and intuitive that a player of any age or ability could adapt to it extremely quickly. Despite its different currencies, upgrade trees and specs, this game is inherently easy to play and all the better for it. There are no over-arching narrative shackles or team-based intricacies to worry about like in other games; this is merely a proving ground. The narratives write themselves as the game is mastered and the team-focused love-in that is so in vogue at the moment is entirely optional. There is safety in numbers, sure, but playing alongside friends or forging single-serving allegiances with strangers isn't so much a prerequisite as an optional extra the player can plump for if they like.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

INTERNET SUCCESS! The *World Of Tanks* servers are extremely responsive – we never had to wait what we'd consider an unacceptable amount of time to join a game, and we're *horribly* impatient.

As for the aforementioned competitive nature of the game, we can safely say that it's present and correct. Being famously competitive – a streak that came to a head in an incident involving *FIFA 11*, a smirking opponent and a broken 360 pad – we found ourselves surprisingly engrossed in the online play. As with the PC version there are no respawns, which staggers your experience slightly if you get unceremoniously mullered at the start of a round by an eight-year-old kid joyriding in a Panzer IV. However, you are given the option to return to the Garage to hop in another of your vehicles and jump into another game, without sacrificing any of the XP you've earned. Even on a dire internet connection we were jumping to and from battles at a rate of knots, indicating a network that has been built to get you playing as much as possible.

IT'S A SYSTEM THAT IS SO INTUITIVE THAT ANY PLAYER OF ANY AGE OR ABILITY COULD ADAPT TO IT EXTREMELY QUICKLY

All this is wrapped up in a basic, yet strangely compelling package. It's not often that a game can purvey such simple mechanics and yet feel enjoyable to play for hours at a time. It needs work in terms of visuals, but *World Of Tanks: Xbox 360 Edition* ticks all the necessary boxes. Add in the free-to-play aspect and you're left with a game that's more than worth playing.



Above: The environments available at present are fairly barren. You can expect more detail to filter through over the coming months as updates appear. **Left:** Mobile artillery causes all sorts of problems if you're zipping about in a low-powered tank. It's not often that you'll be destroyed in one hit, but if you are you can pretty much guarantee that it's one of these guys.

VERDICT 7/10
AN ADMIRABLE ADAPTATION THAT IS SIMPLE AND SATISFYING

Below: While turn-based, as each character moves their day advances from dawn to night. Knowing where your troops are at various times of the day later becomes crucial as battles open up on multiple fronts.





YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE WAR OF THE SOLSTICE BEGAN

Doomdark's Revenge

As impressive as it is to play *San Andreas* on a touchscreen, the same is true of *Doomdark's Revenge*. Not because it pushes its new host hardware to any perceptible limits, but because it already long ago proved itself far beyond its contemporaries. More importantly, perhaps, nothing much like it has appeared since, which given that *Doomdark's Revenge* was first released back when games were painfully loaded in from cassette gives you some idea of the obscure reverence it commands.

While it may look like a wargame, *Doomdark's Revenge* is closer in essence to an adventure, only instead of objects to collect and combine, here you must roam the frozen lands searching for Lords to join your cause. This is easier said than done, for not only are their five races in the game, but each of more than 100 lords has his own personal traits, dislikes and allegiances to consider when approached to join your banner. Get your diplomacy wrong by wooing a staunchly loyal Fey with a treacherous Dwarf Lord, and you could find yourself dealing with an internal spat that your side can hardly afford. Get it right - bearing in mind that only the antagonist in the game, Shareth the Heartstealer, is fully against you – and a military victory is assured.

If that all sounds like hard work that's because it is. Until they've chosen a side, each Lord will move independently and fight amongst themselves – and with 6,000 map locations there's a lot of frozen ground to cover. With various types of terrain slowing you down, bands of creatures to vanquish, tiredness, fear and troop numbers and morale to weigh up, it's perhaps a blessed relief that battles are automated; with news of each defeat or victory delivered by way of a stark and often brutal morning report.

That you have to take all this in via flick-screen first-person views and lengthy text reports from all your generals only adds to the complexity, yet while you could argue that the game would be more approachable were characters able to be moved via the map and their traits and troop numbers displayed visually, not only would the game no longer be recognisable, its narrative charms would be wholly obscured.

In any case, it's entirely possible to complete the game by avoiding large-scale warfare and conducting instead a lightning raid toward the enemy's northern fortress. But that's not really the point because like all good strategy games, victory in *Doomdark's Revenge* can often be snatched from the jaws of defeat (and vice versa), and tracking your commanders, keeping in mind their weaknesses and the positions of the enemy is where the challenge ultimately lies.

Doomdark's Revenge, like its predecessor and unlike most games that have been released since, is a game that should be savoured as much as it is played, enjoyed in comfort like the dense slab of fantasy fiction that it is.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS, PC, Mac
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Chilli Hugger
DEVELOPER: Mike Singleton / Chris Wild
PRICE: £2.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BETTER THAN GUARDIANS OF MIDDLE-EARTH

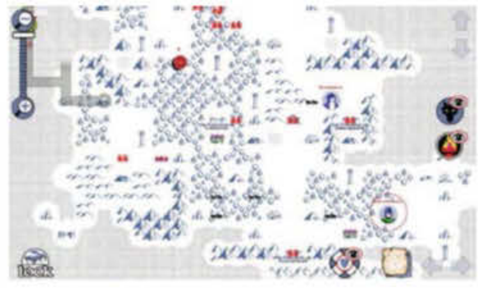
AS GOOD AS THE LORDS OF MIDNIGHT

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TOP DOWN The ability to track your generals via an expanding top-down map and group and move units under one Lord is a welcome concession to modern control methods, but it won't go far enough for some.







VERDICT 8/10
UNIQUELY ABSORBING STORYTELLING AND STRATEGY





WHY I ♥...

Command & Conquer

ELISA DE LORENZO, UNTOLD GAMES – LOADING HUMAN

Command & Conquer is the game that made me realise I wanted to get into games development. I like strategy quite a lot, particularly real-time strategy, and back when it was released I really got into it because it told you something – it wasn't just going around, building an army, destroying your enemy; there was a lot of storytelling there, too. It was a compelling experience. Command & Conquer came at the right time – Westwood did a lot of cool stuff before, but this was definitely its pinnacle.

"Westwood did a lot of cool stuff before, but this was definitely its pinnacle"

ELISA DE LORENZO, UNTOLD GAMES – LOADING HUMAN

RETRO

NO.146



DISCUSS | Have your say on all things retro on our dedicated forum **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum**

DRIVER™

BEHIND THE SCENES

Pioneering the 3D open world driving game, games™ takes a look back at the PSone classic that would define a whole genre that followed

Released: 1999
Format: PSone
Publisher: GT Interactive Software
Developer: Reflections Interactive
Key Staff: Martin Edmondson, creator

CINEMA HAS BEEN the greatest influence on the evolution of videogames. Some of the most successful examples of the medium strive to evoke the power of film, whether through re-enacting a specific scene from a movie, peppering its narrative with references, or, in some cases, cribbing ideas almost entirely from cinematic fiction.

But far from an unimaginative way of generating new gameplay experiences, as *Driver* proved, looking to the silver screen for inspiration can break the mold, and creator Martin Edmondson felt that, with the arrival of the PSone, the time had finally come for him to translate a film genre he had long held dear into a virtual experience to be shared.

"I wanted to create a game about movie car chases for a while due to a childhood obsession with them," Edmondson enthuses to **games™**, "but the hardware available in the 8- and 16-bit days never really had the power to do it justice. Then during the development of our first PSone game, *Destruction Derby*, I was mucking around on The Crossroads track and imagined that crossover being a proper junction with working traffic, traffic lights and so on. That was the moment I thought we should try and do it."

The pitch was simple enough: *Driver* would be an open-world driving game that placed players in the shoes of a getaway driver. However, Sony baulked at the felonious theme and instead demanded the story was tweaked with a broader remit. "From a story concept perspective, Tanner was originally supposed to be a getaway driver, but Sony was pushing for a more positive role model type of



■ Much like a lot of PSone titles, *Driver*'s visuals haven't aged well. But at the time, this was the apex of graphical fidelity.

scenario so we changed him into an undercover cop," reveals Edmondson. "It was a change of mood and story but it didn't really affect the game much as Tanner still ended up doing a lot of legally dubious stuff in his undercover work!"

It all starts with a hulking yellow muscle car parked beneath the blinding Miami sunlight as the flashing lights of the law creep closer behind. Tyres wail in agony as plumes of smoke rise from beneath the rubber in protest, the sirens blaze and the driver slams his foot on the accelerator. The chase was on.

In these early moments, *Driver* encapsulated everything that Edmondson had hoped to achieve: the exhilarating rush of the car chase, replete with screeching maneuvers, narrow misses with pedestrians, tearing down narrow alleyways and smashing through improbably stacked boxes.



■ One of the Marmite moments of *Driver*: having to stop at traffic lights and crossings – don't want to alert the cops!

It was the type of scene we've seen countless times before, taking its cues from a litany of notable car chase films such as *Gone In 60 Seconds*, *The French Connection* and *Bullitt*, but it was the 1978 film *The Driver* that served as the main inspiration for the game.

"You hit the nail on the head really," Edmonson responds when we raise the comparison. "*The Driver* was the first film I went to see at the cinema as a kid with my parents and so it clearly had a lasting impression on me! The garage sequence from that film is an obvious influence, one in which Ryan O'Neal destroys an old orange Mercedes demonstrating his skills as a getaway driver."

Of course, Edmondson incorporated a range of influences almost exclusively from the Seventies and Eighties, including *Vanishing Point*, *Fear Is The Key* and *Starsky And Hutch* (in fact, Huggy Bear himself, Antonio Fargas, starred in the television commercials for the game). It was in replicating the gritty tone of the era that inspired it, with an undercurrent of absurdity, that made *Driver*'s campaign (titled *Undercover* on the main menu) such a roaring success. It was here that we were introduced to the series' leading protagonist Detective John Tanner, whose arrival was unsurprisingly heralded by a car chase – following an opening cinematic where Tanner solemnly approaches his Ford Mustang within an empty car park. The story took the maverick detective undercover, tasked with infiltrating a crime syndicate by posing as a 'driver for hire.'

Therefore, while Tanner was still part of the law, it didn't prevent him from performing increasingly difficult driving missions involving stalking other vehicles,



Posted by:
MERMAN
It was an interesting game, reasonably fast 3D with the car handling well. At times the story and the missions did drag, but for the time it was well worth playing.

Posted by:
SNAGGLETOOTH
It had some nice ideas, the replay editor was good once you sussed it, but the game was so damn infuriating.

Posted by:
THEREALJAXON
Driver was an awesome game and nothing else matched it. From the sun-soaked setting, awesome muscle cars, cool story, fun car physics… I could go on.

I spent hours on this game even after completing it, usually creating a massive traffic pile up then launching my car off a bridge into the middle. And the PlayStation, bless it, handled the chaos quite well.

Posted by:
SHINYMCSHINE
Driving around adhering to speed limits and stopping at lights didn't equal fun for me.

Posted by:
RYAN WHITELAW
It did exactly what the developers set out to do. It made you feel like being in a Seventies car chase film. I spent many an hour trying to recreate *Bullitt* and *Vanishing Point* in theatre mode. Loved it.





THE DRIVER LEGACY

We take a look at the complete Driver franchise, taking into account the highs and lows of the series



DRIVER 2

The second instalment in the *Driver* franchise pioneered the concept of an open-world driving game where the player could get out of the car. While this was strictly limited to flipping switches (hampered by awkward controls), the fact that this was possible on the PSone, while *Grand Theft Auto* was still utilising a simple top-down perspective, is a phenomenal technical achievement.



DRIVER 3

The most contentious entry in the series, the sequel capitalised on the success of *Grand Theft Auto III* by implementing firearms and expanding the open world with the added power of the PlayStation 2. It was panned by critics for its ham-fisted narrative and sloppy controls, but was still a commercial success. The series has been recovering from that fallout from this disastrous sequel in the years since.



DRIVER: PARALLEL LINES

This sequel was the most violent entry in the series to date – receiving an 18 rating in the UK – and casts a criminal in the lead role rather than an undercover cop. It also made a departure from the multiple cities formula, being entirely located in New York. However, with solid gameplay and a relatively involving storyline, it fared better than its predecessor.



DRIVER 76

This PSP exclusive is similar to *Parallel Lines* – it's set solely in New York City, stars some of the same characters and takes place a couple of years before the events of its predecessor. While not quite as remarkable as its console outings, it's a decent spin-off and developer Sumo Digital did an admirable job taking over. It was also the first entry to be published by Ubisoft after it acquired Reflections.



DRIVER: SAN FRANCISCO

The entry that brought Martin Edmondson back to lead design and development. It's closer to the original vision of the series, bringing the action back behind the steering wheel and concentrating on high-octane chases around San Francisco. Players could jump into other vehicles using the 'Shift' feature, which transported Tanner's consciousness into other drivers.



DRIVER: RENEGADE 3D

A Nintendo 3DS exclusive, the action switches back to New York City as Tanner is tasked with taking down the crime mobs infesting the city. Surprisingly, this portable spin-off is huge, with 80 missions and 50 cars that can be tuned in the garage. It hasn't made much of an impact at retail, but it's a serviceable continuation of the franchise that has stalled over the past couple of years.

smashing through restaurants, stealing cars and, conversely, driving conservatively so not to set off a bomb strapped to the bottom of your vehicle.

Yet, while adjusting the story to suit his taskmasters' taste was easy enough for Reflections, Edmondson and his team still couldn't be sure that Sony's latest hardware was up to the task of delivering on *Driver*'s vision. After *Destruction Derby*, the team was still learning optimisation tricks of the machine and the immense technical challenge of creating a 3D city driving game (divided into four cities: Miami, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York) meant that the game took a great deal longer to develop than Reflections' aforementioned previous title.

"The PSone was powerful for its time, obviously, but it was a lot we were asking of it and there was an almost endless cycle of optimisation necessary," explains Edmondson. "Also the data for each of the four cities was far too big for the PSone to hold in memory so we had to develop custom tech to stream all of this data seamlessly in real-time off the CD as the player drove freely around the city. And remember that the player could suddenly choose to turn left or right, which involved seeking and pulling data from different parts of the CD. It was a nightmare to optimise this streaming, made worse by the fact that different units had slightly different read speeds, so everything had to be built around the worse case scenario! Pretty much anything else that may have been relatively straight forward and in a more standard racing game was complicated by the fact that it was open world with hundreds of junctions, and not a racetrack."

Traffic and cop AI, collision detection with the buildings, scenery occlusion, pedestrians and street furniture all exacerbated the studio's battle with memory and frame rate – the game simply *had* to run at 20-30fps to be playable and fluid.

"We ended up with some pretty crafty solutions to maintain the framerate, which is why the game took so long to develop," adds Edmondson. "Open world games are pretty common these days but on the PSone back then it was a big ask! I think the poor thing practically had smoke pouring out of it!"

There are two specific missions that everyone remembers from *Driver*. One is the final mission, The President's Run, which, as you can imagine,



■ The selection of muscle cars on offer cemented *Driver* as a dream title for hobbyists. The sense of speed was exhilarating.



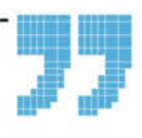
WHAT THEY SAID…

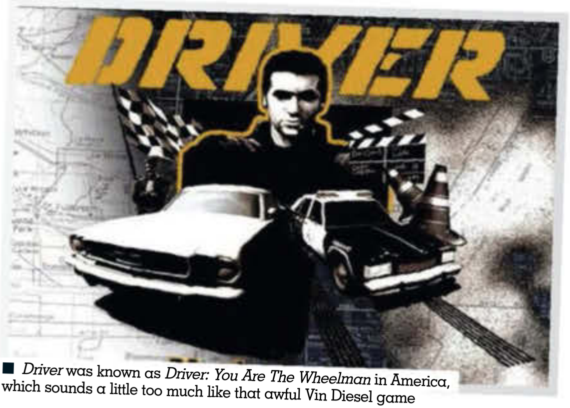


One-hundred and twenty-eight bit Dreamcast my ass! Who needs it if it doesn't have Driver… Did I say I love this game? It's pure driving poetry.

IGN,

July 1999





■ *Driver* was known as *Driver: You Are The Wheelman* in America, which sounds a little too much like that awful Vin Diesel game

involves rescuing the President of the United States. The second is the opening tutorial mission, The Garage, which involves throwing a car around the streets and returning to Tanner's hideout in under 60 seconds. However, far from a warm-up for novice players, the latter proved incredibly frustrating. Edmondson recalls the steep difficult curve of the intro as one of the few mistakes he made on the project.

"It was possible to complete this in 23 seconds, so giving the player 60 seconds is simple, right?" he jokes. "But of course what I hadn't accounted for really was that we played the game for so many hours every day during test that we were not representative of even a good player, never mind an average or poor one. The real design mistake however was in not allowing the player to progress to the main story missions until you had completed The Garage. That was my mistake and you would never *ever* design a game like that now! But in the end, I honestly don't regret it; it's something that people still talk about to this day and I'm not sure that would be the case had it not been so insanely difficult!"

It was a problem that was exacerbated by *Driver*'s inimitable car physics, which enhances realism for a sense of dynamic, cinematic style. A combination of true physics and arcade style, it wasn't as stringent as Gran Turismo and possessed more composure than most of its genre brethren. This judicious balance enabled players to race around the streets, throwing the backend around corners at blistering speeds, always while maintaining precise control over the vehicle.

"The basis of the car handling model was very much real physics but we did play with the rules a little to enhance the drama," explains Edmondson. "So, for example, when cornering at high speed we would gradually decrease the coefficient of friction on the rear tyres in a linear fashion to gradually introduce a rear end slide. This isn't what happens in real life of course, but it gives the visual effect and feel of those huge movie car chase tail out slides that we were after. In reality the real stunt driver would have had to unbalance the car, jab the handbrake or give it a boot full of throttle to spin the rear wheels to get those huge slides going. It worked well though, and made the player feel like a driving hero and in control. If you then watched your action in the Film Director it looked like you were giving Ryan O'Neal a run for his money!"

IT WORKED WELL, AND MADE THE PLAYER FEEL LIKE A DRIVING HERO AND IN CONTROL

It was natural that with Edmondson's deep-rooted love of the car chase genre that the inevitable product of watching hours upon hours of screeching tyres and hair-raising stunts would be to give players to opportunity to create their own filmic pursuits.

"That was a lot of work, perhaps too much work in the end," Edmondson says of implementing the Film Director mode. "But we really wanted it since the game was all about *movie* car chases so you should be able to make your own movie, shouldn't you? The Film Director basics were already in the code since

OFF-ROAD DRIVING

■ ANOTHER FONDLY remembered component of the *Driver* experience was the handful of great alternative game modes, like Survivor – where you had to survive as long as possible while being chased by four crazed cops – which became hugely popular with players. We ask Martin Edmondson what sort of technical challenge this posed to the development team.

"It was inspired by the 'It' game mode in our previous game *Destruction Derby*," explains Edmondson. "Any time over one minute was good going if I remember correctly. These games weren't core to the story but they were a good way of getting some quick thrills without having to bother with the story. We had a rally mode in the desert, quick chases, gate races and the Survival mode."

Multiplayer was included, but it required the use of the PS MultiLink cable, which is perhaps why it's so forgettable. "You had to drag your Playstation and TV round to your mate's house basically, which wasn't terribly practical," says Edmondson. "It was pretty solid in the final release but was an absolute nightmare during development with the machines constantly getting out of sync. There were two reasons for doing it this way rather than the more usual split screen: We didn't have the performance to render the scene twice on a single machine at any reasonable framerate, but more critically it was due to the city data being streamed from the CD. If the players headed off into different streets, it wasn't possible to read from two places on the disc at the same time.

For the sequel *Driver 2* we did build a split screen two-player mode but it was with a tiny play area to avoid any disc access and it wasn't a satisfactory experience. More satisfactory than lugging your TV round to your mate's house, though."





■ *Driver* had four main cities you can explore, however you could also unlock Newcastle – Reflection's hometown.





Driver [replicates] the sort of exhilarating car chases you'd see in Hollywood movies

Play, July 2000



we needed that in a rudimentary form during development to create the promo trailers and the cutscenes, so it didn't initially seem like such a massive step to include it in the final game. But, of course, those assumptions always come back and bite you with way more work than you think to make it robust enough to be unleashed in the real world. In any game development there are all sorts of clever tricks and optimisations you can employ if you know roughly where the camera is looking, but many of those go right out the window if the camera can be looking *anywhere* at any time. We got to see some fantastic mini movies created by players though so I think for those with a similar fascination with car chases to us got a lot out of the feature."

Still, while this was by far one of the greatest technical challenges working on *Driver*, Edmondson found himself faced with the daunting task of designing a campaign's-worth of action-packed missions that all take place behind the wheel of a car.

"This was quite difficult to be honest," he admits. "I mean there are only so many different things you can do with mission design where the player is locked in the car. You can chase, be chased, race, smash up, follow, deliver, drive carefully, do stunts, etc, but by then you are really starting to struggle for more ideas, so there was a fair amount of repetition of mechanics with a different context.

"The real problem came when certain missions only became playable to test late in the game's development," he adds. "Some of these simply didn't work at *all* for one reason or another, but

WE GOT TO SEE SOME FANTASTIC MOVIES CREATED BY PLAYERS

we'd already built the story around them! That taught us a lot about the importance of flexible mission development and structure for the sequels. In the first *Driver* there were a couple of missions that we simply had no choice but to remove and it did cause a glitch in the story flow that was probably difficult for the player to understand."

That didn't prevent *Driver* from becoming a runaway success. Car enthusiasts swooned over its high-octane drama and automobile romanticism, becoming a massive hit on the PSone. It wasn't long before a sequel was touted and Edmondson and his team took some massive steps in a new direction for the genre. Or, more specifically, Tanner did by stepping outside the car.

While Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto III* is often cited as the first open-world driving game that allows the protagonist to walk around the streets, it was in fact *Driver 2* that introduced the concept.

"*Grand Theft Auto III* was released a long time after *Driver* and it was on PlayStation 2, which, of course, was a whole different beast," says Edmondson of the

■ The studio's work on Destruction Derby served them well when it came to creating punchy collisions and heart-pounding car chases.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION Destruction Derby > Driver > Grand Theft Auto III



The physics and raw energy of *Destruction Derby* influenced the development team to take the concept to a whole new level.

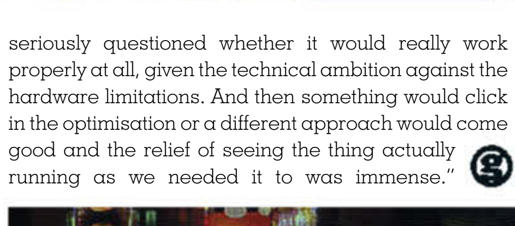


Driver (and its sequel) proved the nascent possibilities of a sprawling open world that could be explored by car or foot.

frequent comparison between the two games. "What was a little bit irritating, was that we would occasionally read that *GTA III* was the first open world game where the player could get out of the car, when *Driver 2* had done that much earlier. To be fair though, the out of car action in *Driver 2* was incredibly limited, all you could do was run between cars and flick the odd switch! He wasn't the most well equipped for running around the streets, but again it was PSone days and there were compromises everywhere."

Returning to the original, *Driver* pushed boundaries in a genre that was coasting along recycling the same ideas. By looking a little further afield for inspiration, Edmondson struck upon a concept that ignited a more prosperous and daring type of game, and one that would change both driving and open world games forever. Even today, Edmondson recalls the thrill of trying to attempt something that had never been achieved before.

The thing I remember most was simply the raw excitement of pulling off something that had really never been done before in a game," enthuses Edmondson, "while at the same time being something that was so in sync with my own personal love of Seventies car chases movies. At times during development we seriously questioned whether it would really work properly at all, given the technical ambition against the hardware limitations. And then something would click in the optimisation or a different approach would come good and the relief of seeing the thing actually running as we needed it to was immense."

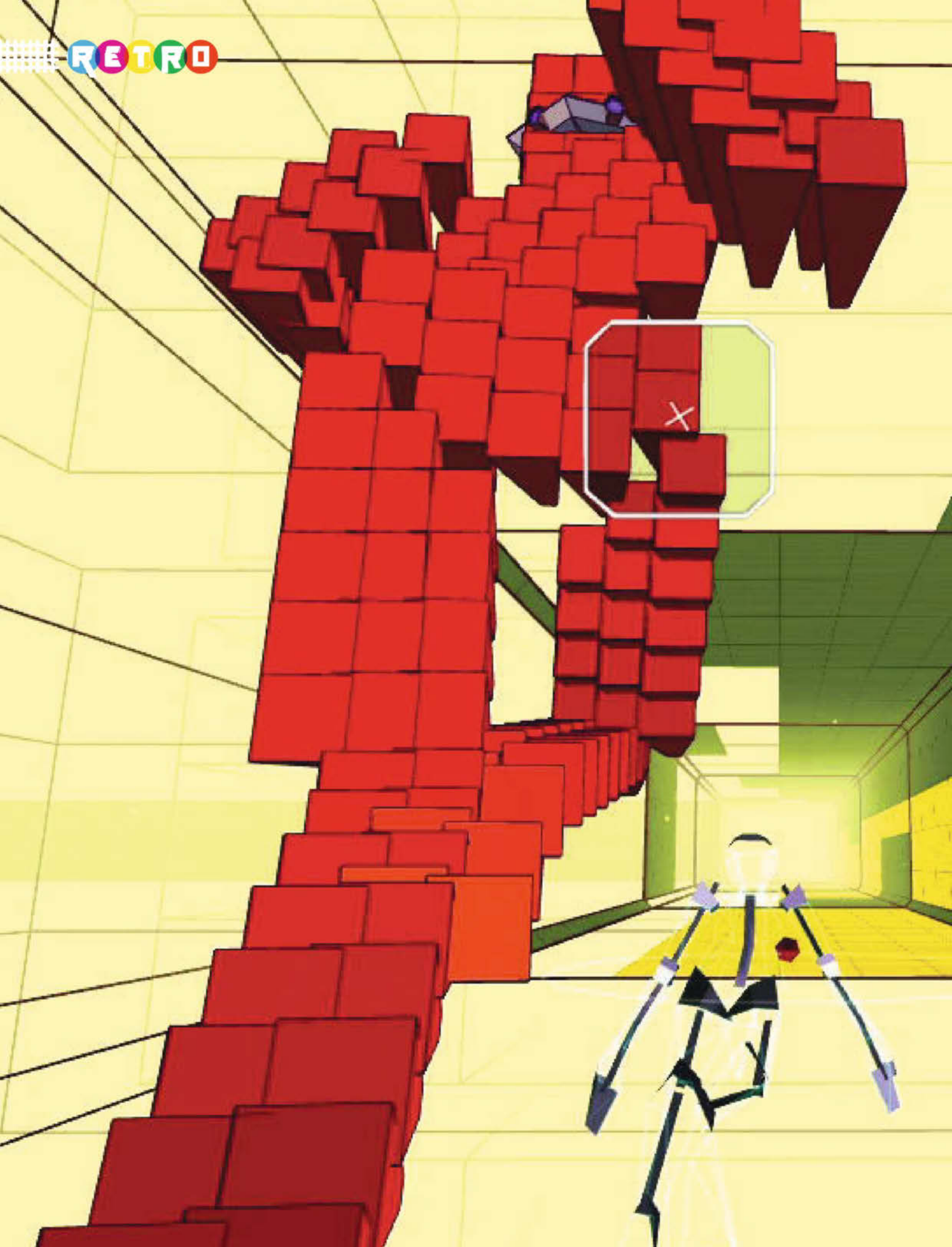




■ *Driver* was a massive technical achievement on the PSone, paving the way for its sequel that would be the first open-world driving game where players could get out on foot.



■ Edmondson and his team evoked many of the movies that influenced the game. Driving down the streets of San Francisco at high speed was pure *Bullitt*.





BEST BOSS

REZ

PLAYSTATION 2 [UNITED ARTIST GAMES] **2001**

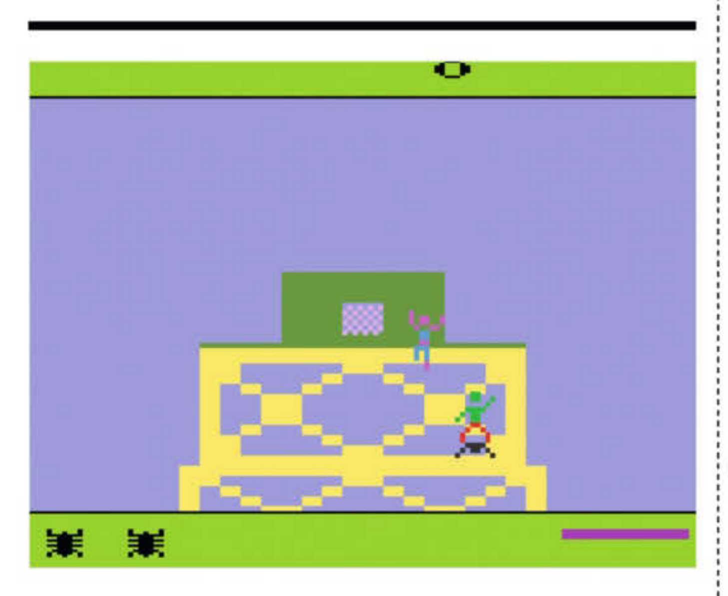
■ SOUND DESIGN has never been more intrinsic to a gameplay conceit than in Tetsuya Mizuguchi's esoteric rail shooter *Rez*. The combination of punchy synth riffs and sturdy percussion beats accompanying each player interaction reinforces an already invigorating electronic soundtrack, creating a congruent blend of urgency and tension that feeds directly the title's most pulse-pounding sequences. The exhilarating backing track present towards the end of level 4 immediately indicates a heady challenge ahead: a boss that takes on a humanoid form and starts hurtling through a series of twisting corridors as you attempt to blast every last pixel from its being. Triumphing over this marathon enemy requires both the utmost dexterity and lightning-fast reflexes and doing it is not only utterly rewarding but will amplify your admiration of Mizuguchi's wondrous technical achievement.

THE RETRO GUIDE TO...

SPIDER-MAN

As the sequel to The Amazing Spider-Man gets unleashed in cinemas, we felt it was the perfect time to play through his videogame adventures…

SPIDER-MAN REMAINS one of Marvel's most cherished creations, so it should come as no surprise to learn that he's starred in a great many videogame since his Atari 2600 debut in 1982. Sadly, unlike DC's Batman, the hit ratio of Spider-Man games is generally a lot lower. Not as bad as Superman of course, but old Spidey has still been in a number of stinkers, with Marvel seemingly uncaring about what he's appeared in over the last three decades. Join us then as we unearth every single one of his games, from platformer to scrolling fighter and discover just how good they really are. Our own senses are beginning to tingle…



SPIDER-MAN 1982

SYSTEM: ATARI 2600

Every hero has a beginning and Spider-Man's is on the humble Atari 2600. It's an early film licence effort from Parker Bros and a poor start for Spidey, with crude blocky graphics and clunky controls. Yes, it features web-slinging and wall climbing, but it also boasts naff collision detection and some truly infuriating gameplay. It's certainly not the greatest of starts for our friendly neighbourhood wallcrawler, but every hero has to start somewhere.





QUESTPROBE FEATURING SPIDER-MAN 1984

SYSTEM: ATARI 2600

Spider-Man's second videogame outing was by text adventure master Scott Adams and was the second of Scott's planned *Questprobe* series that would ultimately feature 12 games (only three were released). *Questprobe: Spider-Man* is an extremely entertaining graphic adventure with a slick parser, enjoyable story and decent visuals. The *Questprobe* games were complemented by a comic series, which only lasted for three of its proposed issues due to Adventure International's bankruptcy.



SPIDER-MAN AND CAPTAIN AMERICA IN DOCTOR DOOM'S REVENGE 1989

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

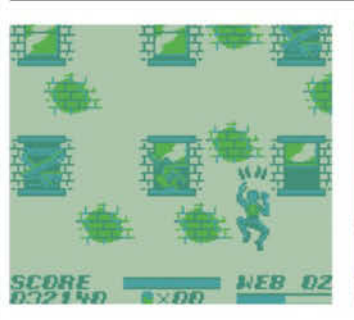
Interesting fighting game where you continually switch between Spidey and Captain America. The game consists of viewing decent comic panels before being transported to a showdown with a villain – quite a few obscure ones as well – ranging from Boomerang to Batroc The Leper. The presentation is nice and slick, but the clunky controls and long loading times kill it.

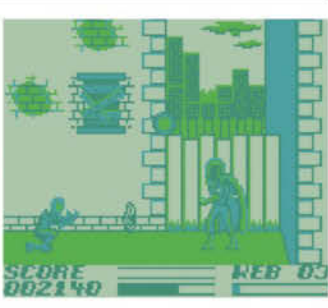


THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 1990

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Oxford Digital Enterprises moves away from the action to have Spider-Man climbing up and down walls in search of switches. If that sounds about as exciting as watching *Spider-Man 3* then you'd be right. We like how the tiny sprites impart a great sense of scale, but Spidey's sluggish speed and the dull gameplay let it down.





THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 1990

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

The first good Spider-Man game appears and it's by Rare. It features bold animated sprites, responsive controls and amazingly funky music. Best of all though, is how well it captures the essence of Spidey; there are encounters with popular villains, from Mysterio to Rhino; plenty of cool abilities, including web swinging, web shooting and Spidey's 'Spider Sense' and lots of fun banter in the cut-scenes.



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 1992

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

After the success of Rare's game, publisher LJN was quick to get another Spider-Man game into production. Bits Studio was in charge, but it failed to capture the fun of Rare's effort. The controls feel far more fiddly and the action doesn't flow as well as a result. There's a decent selection of villains to face, including a face-off with Carnage, but this is an otherwise average action adventure with very little going for it.

"AN AVERAGE ACTION ADVENTURE WITH VERY LITTLE GOING FOR IT"



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 3: INVASION OF THE SPIDER-SLAYERS 1993

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

The most impressive thing about Bits Studios' sequel is the amount of variety that's been crammed into it. One minute you're punching muggers off skateboards, the next you're climbing the twin towers – there's even a movie crossover, with Spidey kicking seven shades out of Ridley Scott's Alien. It falls down though due to stiff controls that make it awkward to play.



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN VS THE KINGPIN 1990

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

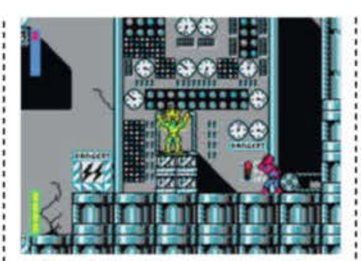
Sega gained the Spider-Man licence during the early Nineties and made a number of games. *Kingpin* is a great one due to slick visuals, varied gameplay and the best wall-crawling in a Spider-Man game so far. There are neat gameplay mechanics – including the ability to take photos of enemies and sell them for web fluid – and it's only let down by a stiff difficulty curve. A cut-down version was released for the Master System and Game Gear.

SPIDER-MAN: THE VIDEO GAME 1991

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Sega delivers an exciting scrolling fighter featuring gorgeous cartoon visuals, cool scaling effects and all the onomatopoeia you could ask for. Spidey teams up with Hawkeye, Black Cat and Sub-Mariner in order to duff up his biggest foes. It runs out of steam due to its repetitiveness, but it's still amazing fun.





SPIDER-MAN: RETURN OF THE SINISTER SIX 1992

SYSTEM: NES, MASTER SYSTEM, GAME GEAR

Bits Studios and LJN return with another Spidey game but it won't get your senses tingling. It's an overly difficult romp, with laughably inaccurate controls and tiny sprites. Loosely based on the popular comic run of the time, it's a terrible Spider-Man game that even fans will find hard to love.



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN VS THE KINGPIN 1993

SYSTEM: MEGA CD

This is completely different to the other games so needs its own entry. The visuals are greatly improved, with neat parallel scrolling effects and a far quicker Spider-Man. It's now possible to access levels in any order via an overhead map, while there are plenty of superb cut-scenes and voice-acting that enhance the atmosphere no end.

SPIDER-MAN AND THE X-MEN IN ARCADE'S REVENGE 1992

SYSTEM: SUPER NINTENDO

Spider-Man teams up with the X-Men in this dull action platformer, which marks Software Creations' first stab at the franchise. The unlikely scenarios – Wolverine in a toy world? – are at least explained in the story, but it just doesn't feel like a good Spider-Man game. It's further let down by bland visuals and some sticky controls. Not terrible, but particularly disappointing after the excellent Kingpin games.

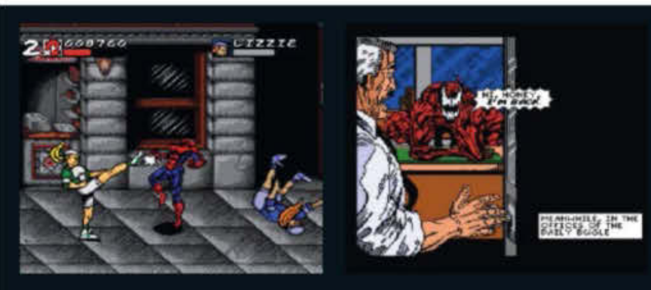


SPIDER-MAN AND HIS AMAZING MERCHANDISE

Adventures on lesser machines



Spider-Man's massive popularity has ensured that he's appeared in a large number of games outside of the main ones we've featured here. Tiger licensed the webslinger so that he could appear in a naff number of LCD releases, while the *Spider-Man Cartoon Maker* enabled fans to create their own mini movies using clips from *Spider-Man The Animated Series*. The continuing interested in CD-ROM spurred Marvel on to release a number of comic books in CD form, including *Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Iron Man* and *The X-Men*. The four *Spider-Man* comics were read by Christopher Daniel Barnes, who played Spider-Man in the cartoon series. Spidey has also appeared in numerous mobile phone games, a terrible compilation by JakksTVGames that plugged directly into a TV and a pinball table based on Sony's first three movies. And that's without mentioning the games he's an actual playable character in…



SPIDER-MAN AND VENOM: MAXIMUM CARNAGE 1994

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

Another scrolling fighter, this time featuring Spidey and Venom. It follows the comics of the same name, featuring animated panels from them that enhance the already superb presentation. Spider-Man and Venom have a great range of moves at their disposal, while the standard scrolling fighter gameplay is enhanced by neat little tricks such as scaling buildings on certain stages and sticking to walls to avoid or get the drop on enemies. There are also Marvel heroes scattered about the levels that can be summoned for devastating attacks if you find them. It's a little difficult on your own, but is otherwise a highly entertaining scrolling fighter.

VENOM/SPIDER-MAN: SEPARATION ANXIETY 1995

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES, PC

Maximum Carnage's sequel follows the same template as before, but isn't as enjoyable. This is mainly due to a far higher difficulty level and its bland locations. It remains fun, but *Maximum Carnage* is the better game. In fact, the most notable thing about it is the obscene prices it now sells for online.

THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN: LETHAL FOES 1995

SYSTEM: SNES

While this is easily the best-looking Spider-Man game on a 16-bit console, it's easy to see why it didn't make it outside of Japan. It suffers from spongy controls, weak combat and iffy collision detection that sucks the enjoyment out of an incredible-looking game. The best thing about it is its superb box art designed by artists, Paul Mounts, Karl Kesel and Mark Bagley.

SPIDER-MAN 1995

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

We want to love this, as it's based on the superb animated series and has an amazingly funky rendition of the theme tune. Hell, there's even support from the Fantastic Four and an amazing array of bosses that includes Lizard, Kraven The Hunter, Scorpion and Green Goblin. Sadly the gameplay is bland in the extreme, being a derivative action platformer that doesn't do the cartoon or Spidey justice.



SPIDER-MAN: WEB OF FIRE 1996

SYSTEM: SEGA 32X

Web Of Fire comes from that awful period of gaming where publishers thought digitised graphics were the way forward. Owners will tell you that it's a polished brawler with great-looking visuals and balanced gameplay, but it's actually the opposite of that and not worth the hundreds of pounds it sells for.

SPIDER-MAN (PLAYSTATION) 2000

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Using Tony Hawk's engine, it's a solid start to the 3D Spider-Man games, with decent combat and a nice variety to its levels, but its camera is insanely frustrating. The web-swinging is enjoyable though, and the addition of clear ceilings so you can see what you're doing when climbing is also a nice touch.





SPIDER-MAN 2000

SYSTEM: GAME BOY COLOR

Created by Vicarious Visions, Spidey's portable adventure wasn't a patch on his 3D outing, featuring dull level design, frustrating combat and twitchy controls. The graphics are a big improvement over past Game Boy releases, but it lacks the style and balance of Rare's original game.





SPIDER-MAN 2: ENTER ELECTRO 2001

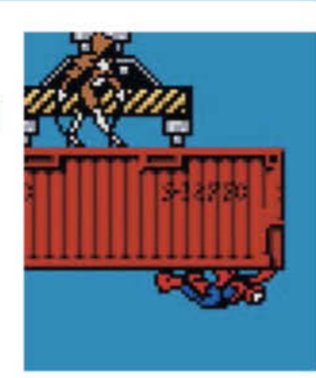
SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION

Solid sequel by Vicarious Visions that takes place after the events of the original game. Unlike *Spider-Man*, it's now possible to roam the streets of New York, while combat is enhanced with the addition of new skills like the web ball. It otherwise suffers from the same frustrating camera angles found in the original.

SPIDER-MAN 2: THE SINISTER SIX 2001

SYSTEM: GAME BOY COLOR

A far superior sequel, this time from Torus Games. While the gameplay consists of simple fetch quests, it runs at a far slicker pace thanks to an incredibly agile Spidey. Graphically it's ace as well, with bright and colourful visuals and impressive animation. Along with the original Spider-Man, this is his best outing on Nintendo's earlier handhelds.



SPIDER-MAN: MYSTERIO'S MENACE 2001

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

Spider-Man's first exclusive GBA game is a doozy. Vicarious Visions atones for its earlier GBC sins with an action-packed adventure that plays extremely well, running at a nice slick pace. The graphical style is a little too gritty, but the focus on exploration, large amount of secrets to discover and use of obscure villains certainly makes up for it. A nice handheld treat.







SPIDER-MAN: THE MOVIE 2002

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Based on the new film, *Spider-Man: The Movie* was a fine effort from Treyarch, building on the mechanics found in the earlier PlayStation games. The camera is still a pain, but the graphics, combat and general gameplay are greatly improved, with a fine selection of bosses.

SPIDER-MAN 2: THE GAME 2004

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

This is the best 3D Spider-Man game ever made and nothing has come close to it in later years. Set in an expansive open version of Manhattan it fuses Spider-Man mechanics with the *GTA* template to create a huge game that always gives you something to do. It's notable for its realistic web-swinging, an excellent voice cast and imaginative boss fights, which are greatly enhanced over previous 3D games.



ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN 2005

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Another strong outing that's noted for its glorious cel-shaded graphics. The fun story switches between both Spider-Man and Venom, while there's a variety of missions to complete, particularly side missions that range from trick races to finding hidden items.



SPIDER-MAN: BATTLE FOR NEW YORK 2006

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE, NINTENDO DS, MOBILE

A terrible game that switches between Green Goblin and Spider-Man. While the visuals are bright, the dull quests and clunky controls make for a terrible adventure.

SPIDER-MAN 3: THE GAME 2007

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

While it features many of the *GTA*-style gameplay mechanics from the previous game, this doesn't work quite as well. The swinging doesn't feel as fun, the graphics aren't that great, and the combat feels sluggish. There are numerous versions around, but the console ports are the best.





BEHIND THE SCENES
INTERVIEW: THE PICKFORD BROS

Ste and John Pickford discuss the making of Maximum Carnage

How much support did you get from Marvel and did they ask for any specific changes?

Ste: I don't recall us having anything to do with Marvel at all. We were making the game for Acclaim, so Acclaim was calling the shots. They weren't going to fly us to New York, and I doubt anyone at Marvel fancied flying to Manchester to see us. As for support? [Laughs] I think we got one retail copy of the comic series the game was licensed from, and that was it.

What was the reason for using various metal songs in the game for the boss music?

Ste: [Groans] That was imposed on us by Acclaim. They'd done a deal to get a Green Jelly track in the game, which was just awful. All they gave us was a recording of the track, but as this was a SNES cartridge we couldn't just put the recording on the CD as you would with a PlayStation, so the musician on the game, Chris Jojo, had to spend ages converting the track into chip music. I think his SNES conversion sounded better than the original. Then Chris went with that theme for the rest of the music in the game. Every single one of Chris's other original tracks were way better than the Green Jelly one, which really stood out as the worst piece of music in the game. After all his hard work, the cover and poster for the game said 'music by Green Jelly'. That was a real kick in the teeth for him, as it was all his work.

What were the biggest technical challenges you faced?

John: I wasn't the coder on this game but from what I remember the biggest challenge was fitting all the animation frames onto the cart.

And what was the reason for summoning Marvel characters?

John: Having lots of playable characters wouldn't have been practical so we came up with the idea of using the additional characters as fancy 'smart-bombs'. They could appear, do their thing and clear off! Because they each only had a single action we could keep the amount of graphical data to a minimum.



SPIDER-MAN AND HIS AMAZING FRIENDS

Spidey's many supporting roles

In addition to all the main games we've featured, Spidey is also playable in a large number of other releases. The most notable ones are Capcom's various *Versus* fighters where he battles alongside other Marvel and Capcom heroes, the MMORPG *Marvel Heroes*, the Facebook game *Marvel: Avengers Alliance* and the kid-friendly *Marvel Super Hero Squad*. Among many other games, he's also recently cropped up in the excellent *Lego Marvel Super Heroes*. He's easily the most prolific comic book character of all time when it comes to videogames, a testament to his popularity.



SPIDER-MAN: FRIEND OR FOE 2007

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

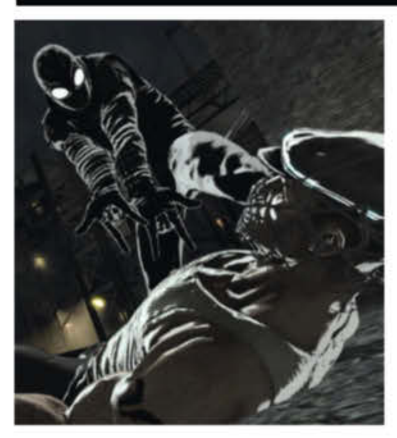
Friend Or Foe sees you team up with other superheroes and then convert the villains you defeat. This neat concept ends up being no good, since it relies on twitchy controls, unsatisfying combat, and repetitive gameplay.



SPIDER-MAN: WEB OF SHADOWS 2008

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

More violent than previous Spider-Man games, but there's little else to separate it from past games. The web-swinging is fun, but the combat is bland. It's nice to see your progress being affected by choices, but this remains an average outing.



SPIDER-MAN: SHATTERED DIMENSIONS 2010

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Quite possibly the most enjoyable Spider-Man game on current-gen systems. Four Spider-Men are drawn from four different Marvel universes, and each Spidey handles differently in combat, while play switches through both third and first person. The voice acting is also superb.



SPIDER-MAN: EDGE OF TIME 2011

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

After getting things right with *Shattered Dimensions*, Beenox drops the ball, delivering a silly time-hopping story and a 'cause-and-effect' gameplay mechanic that's nowhere near as effective as it sounds. There are only two Spideys this time (original Spider-Man and Spider-Man 2009) and the gameplay feels watered down. Pretty disappointing.



THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2012

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

There's a case of super hero identity here as Beenox thinks it's making a Batman *Arkham* game. While the end result is not a patch on Rocksteady's efforts, it's nonetheless an enjoyable open world adventure, with events carrying on a few months after the hit movie finishes. It suffers from being a little bit too easy, but it's an entertaining game for Spider-Man to currently sign off with.





THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 2014

SYSTEM: VARIOUS

Little is known about Beenox's sequel, other than that it will feature a 'Hero Or Menace' morality mechanic that should add some much-needed spice to the Spider-Man template. Expect a large number of villains and a plot that deviates from the incoming film.

GAME CHANGERS

COUNTER-STRIKE

Released: 1999 **Publisher:** Sierra Entertainment **Developer:** Minh 'Gooseman' Le, Jess Cliffe **System:** PC



Last year Valve released the latest iteration of *Counter-Strike, Global Offensive*. It was the second (and more successful) attempt at bringing the shooter to home consoles.

The Half-Life mod-turned-multiplayer-phenomenon, Counter-Strike wasn't just the go-to PC first-person shooter but defined the genre for a new generation

THE PROLIFERATION OF modding during the late-Nineties demonstrated a hotbed of independent creativity, the spirit of which has since transformed into the prosperous climate of 'indie' development. These inventive user-made endeavours ranged from simple gameplay adjustments to complete overhauls of assets and design, themselves often spawning into properties as big as their source DNA.

Many successful mods have gone on to reach mass recognition, but as the trend continued to grow in stature it was Valve that stormed the vanguard as one of the first developers to actively encourage and cultivate a community to tinker and innovate its original design documents. Minh 'Gooseman' Le and Jess Cliffe were just two students when they began working on *Counter-Strike*, both spending more time devoted to coding the game than on their actual studies. But it was a gamble that paid off, the duo selling the game back to Valve, working with the studio and forging its legacy as one of the most influential and enduring FPS of all time.

Released in 1999 as internet multiplayer was in a nascent state, *Counter-Strike* was the antithesis of the excessive slaughter and unrelenting pace of *Quake* and *Unreal Tournament*. Offering a tactical alternative that placed as much emphasis on careful planning and teamwork as it did having lightning-fast reflexes (although speed was also a technical issue with dial-up pings soaring into the 100s), *Counter-Strike* required a completely different mentality to a genre on the brink of revolution.

It was in part due to the round system that reshaped how respawning worked. Rather than hurtling through maps spraying lead with little concern for your own mortality, being reckless had a penalty; death resulted in waiting several minutes for a new round to start and diminished the chances of your team's ability to fulfil its objective. *Counter-Strike* established stakes previously absent from a genre reliant on speed and did so without compromising what made the act of namelessly killing people online so thrilling in the first place.

This contributed to an unprecedented approach to teamwork. It became immediately clear that communication was key to winning. It became even clearer that you couldn't trust strangers. Clans became an integral component to the dedicated

KILLER MOMENTS

WHILE COUNTER-STRIKE IS PACKED FULL OF MOMENT-TO-MOMENT JOYS, A FEW SIMPLE PLEASURES WILL RESONATE WITH ANY CS VET…



KNIFE KILL

★ The knife kill is one of the trickiest manoeuvres to pull of in the tense 5v5 battleground of *Counter-Strike*. And while there's a mischievous gratification in a sly back stab, challenging an opposing player to a proper knife fight and coming out the victor is a true right of passage for any *CS* player.



GAWP AT AWP

★ The first few seconds of any *CS* match is a mad scramble toward the perfect vantage point. Map de_dust2 offers a perfect exploit in that regard; terrorists can arm themselves with the contentious AWP sniper rifle and study the small slit between the main gangway doors for unsuspecting counter-terrorists.



THE BRIDGE

★ The design layout of de_aztec is one of *Counter-Strike*'s most superb creations. The highlight is undoubtedly the bridge that connects one side of map to the other. A claustrophobic walkway dangling above a vast expanse, it's a testament to the brilliant map design that elevates *Counter-Strike* above its competitors.

Counter-Strike experience; it was a proud badge of honour to brandish a clan tag and the incentive to invest more hours into training was rewarded by triumphing in community tournaments and LAN events. *Counter-Strike* became as much a competition as it did a game and there's a clear pathway to the popularity of esports, dedicated portals and the ubiquitous streaming culture that leads right back to the early days of *Counter-Strike* and the dynamic interactions of its community.

More than anything, though, *Counter-Strike* wasn't just a fan creation but fostered a community of fans that contributed as much to the game as they took out. It laid the groundwork and dared its fans to do better, the results of which were some of the most popular maps and user-created modes that dwarfed the creative achievements of the original team. It provided an accessible creative platform; somewhere for would-be developers to cut their teeth in what would become a dominant genre in subsequent years.

Counter-Strike arrived at a flashpoint in the industry, at a time when consumers were beginning to look toward online as a competitive arena. With its combination of simplistic and balanced design outlook, matched with a reliance on player skill, it was the ultimate proving ground for gamers.

It's a testament to the strong foundations of the game that its original retail iteration (referred to as 1.6 due to its original and antiquated patch method) is still played so frequently today despite subsequent sequels. It doesn't have the flashy physics engine of its successor *Source*, nor does it boast the crisp visuals that would come with its most recent console counterpart, but what it does have is an accessibility that made it utterly addictive.

It's hard to imagine the first-person shooter genre being what it is today without *Counter-Strike*. It established the fundamentals of the genre and infused it with a delicate balance that has since been adopted by almost every major FPS franchise. Not only that but its community tweaked the formula further, launching alternate game modes, many of which integrated what has become prevalent across the genre in recent years: the addition of experience points in a mode that shifted the focus onto additional perks and abilities.

Whether or not this influenced *Battlefield* or *Call Of Duty* is a moot point: *Counter-Strike* was there first and, not only that, its original vision stands tall today as one of the best shooters you could possibly spend time playing. It helped redefine a genre, it established the ideal of a prosperous user-generating community and it would influence some of the biggest franchises in modern videogame history. Above all else, though, it's still a game that thousands of people play on a daily basis. Not just for nostalgia purposes, but because its principles and mechanics continue to match the contemporary standards of the genre today. There aren't many games celebrating their 15-year anniversary that can lay claim to that.

COUNTER-STRIKE REQUIRED A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT MENTALITY TO A GENRE ON THE BRINK OF REVOLUTION

KEY FACTS

- Creators Minh Le and Jess Cliffe were hired by Valve following the release of the mod to helped create a full retail version of *Counter-Strike*, which was released a year later.
- Because of the prolific cheating on *Counter-Strike* servers, Valve implemented VAC (Valve Anti-Cheat), which detected any player hacks and permanently banned users trying to use them.
- *Counter-Strike* has since released several sequels to *Counter-Strike*, including the unremarkable *Condition Zero*, the recent console-focused *Global Offensive* and two adaptations aimed at Asian territories.

GAME CHANGERS

THE BEST OF MODNATION



WE TAKE A LOOK AT A SELECTION OF THE MOST CREATIVE AND ENJOYABLE HALF-LIFE MODS THAT HAVE BEEN RELEASED OVER THE YEARS



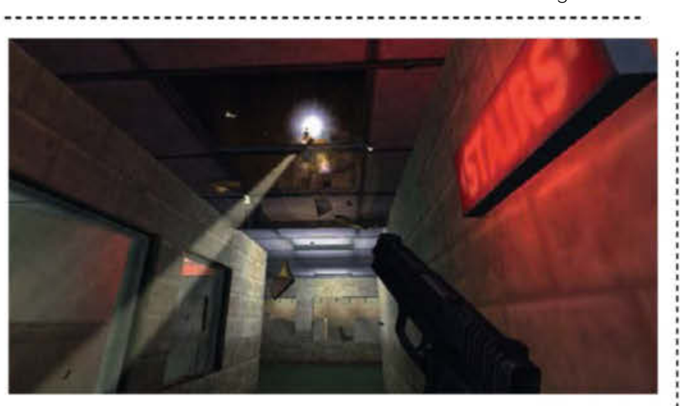
TEAM FORTRESS CLASSIC

■ EQUALLY POPULAR AS *Counter-Strike*, it began life as a popular *Quake* mod before making the jump over to the *Half-Life* engine. *Team Fortress* introduces a class-based system where players must work together to complete objectives. The impact of *Team Fortress* was similar to that of *Counter-Strike*, reaching a level of stratospheric popularity that afforded it a full retail release and would become a continued influence on the genre.



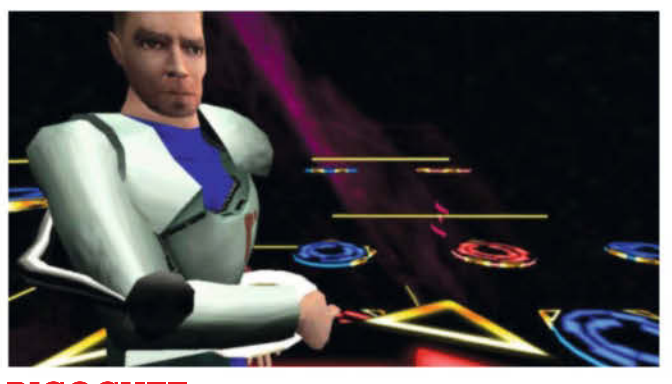
DAY OF DEFEAT

■ ANOTHER MOD THAT was eventually granted a full release, *Day Of Defeat* remains one of the best WWII first-person shooters to ever hit PC. *Day Of Defeat* maps muster scenarios from real WWII battles, with objectives based on historical record. It does an admirable job of evoking the period and presenting a tactical and immersive backdrop. *Day Of Defeat: Source* followed but by then most FPS gamers had moved on to modern warfare.



HALF-LIFE INVASION

■ A SINGLE-PLAYER mod developed out of France as a proposed follow-up to the events of *Half-Life*. It picks up the story after Gordon Freeman encounters G-man and throws the crowbar-wielding physicist through a series of clandestine laboratories to once again save the world. It has some interesting twists on the original setup – including space probes and teleportation – and Freeman even gets to batter aliens with another chunky DIY tool.



RICOCHET

■ A TRON-INSPIRED deadly game of Frisbee dressed up in dayglo colours, *Ricochet* is an oddly compelling multiplayer experience and another *Half-Life* mod that gained cult popularity. There's a simple concept at its core: the main objective is to knock your adversary off one of the floating platforms, using your flying disk and the environment to gain the upper hand. It's a fast-paced and gratifying spin on the traditional deathmatch mode.



SVEN-COOP

■ SVEN-COOP CAN almost be considered a precursor for *Left 4 Dead*. Players had to work together to kill a wave of AI enemies and navigate through each stage working together to solve environmental puzzles. It was more than a little rough around the edges but *SVEN-COOP* had a unique charm and its servers were always packed with shooter fans looking for a fresh challenge.



THEY HUNGER

■ A STORY-FOCUSED single-player horror game, *They Hunger* is set in a backwater Fifties town where you assume the role of a writer who has just moved into the area to gain inspiration for his latest novel. So far, so Alan Wake. But when a zombie apocalypse tears apart the area, it's up to you to save the townsfolk, filling any brain-munching undead that get in your way with lead.



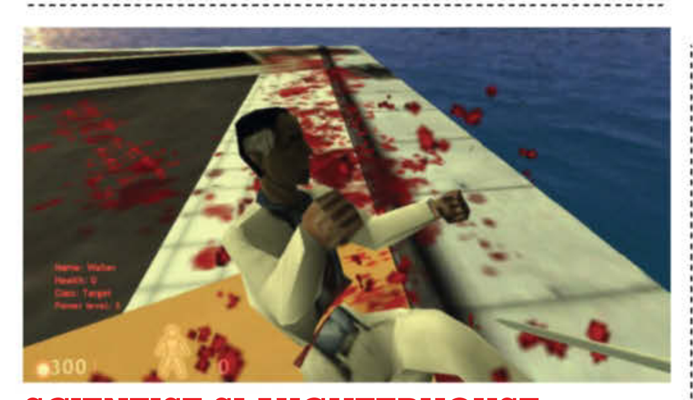
THE SPECIALISTS

■ THE NINETIES WERE big for action movies. With *The Matrix*, John Woo and Michael Bay, games sought to replicate the thrills and carnage seen on the big screen. *The Specialists* does a great job of evoking that era, with incredible action, the implementation of bullet time, and bonuses awarded for pulling off combos and stunts. Whereas *Counter-Strike* wrote the book on tactical online FPS, *The Specialists* took it, stuffed it with a bunch of C4 and fired an RPG at it.



NATURAL SELECTION

■ ANOTHER ONLINE first-person shooter, *Natural Selection* combined the genre with real-time strategy. Pitting marines against aliens on a series of futuristic battlegrounds, most of the action has a first-person perspective with players in various roles on both teams to complete objectives. The most unique is the Marine Commander, with one player on the marine side taking on the role to oversee the battlefield from a top-down perspective and lead the team.



SCIENTIST SLAUGHTERHOUSE

■ IN MANY WAYS, *Scientist Slaughterhouse* has a lot in common with *Garry's Mod*. Both utilise the physics of its native engine to enable players to experiment and dick around in a sandbox. However, *Scientist Slaughterhouse* has a little more structure, where Gordon Freeman has to eradicate scientists who seem to be appearing out of nowhere using increasingly bizarre contraptions and execution techniques to get the job done.



CHEMICAL EXISTENCE

■ ANOTHER TOTAL CONVERSION of *Half-Life*, this atmospheric single-player game features a substantial campaign and a whole new suite of weaponry to explore. Originally developed as *Quake II* mod, the development team worked on *Chemical Existence* for three years before it saw a release. The time paid off, with a slick, satisfying shooter that has players gunning down a series of grunts, gangbangers and mutants that roam the gloomy world.



INTERVIEW

LORNE LANNING

"Follow me," said Oddworld character Abe. And fans did, in droves. Lorne Lanning's decision to put his artistic skills and vision into gaming came off. He tells us more…

When games™ spoke to Lorne Lanning in 2006 about the first *Oddworld* game, he told us that the title's Mudokon star, Abe, was "largely inspired by the plight of Third World labourers who have no voice and are being swept up by the expansion of globalisation." Heavy stuff indeed. But then Lanning is no ordinary videogame designer. Having founded Oddworld Inhabitants with producer Sherry McKenna in 1994, the pair were able to create four award-winning games over 11 years, making their debut with a 2D game on the 3D-centric PlayStation in 1997. Lanning departed gaming in 2005, only to return a few years later and remakes of the *Oddworld* games for new platforms have followed thanks to independent developer Just Add Water. One of them, *Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty!*, is due out this year. Lanning tells us more about his motivations.

So what's your background – what led to you making games?

I was always an artist, and while I studied some programming in college, I was never a coder. I studied code for the same reasons I studied sound design. I knew it would help to have more insightful and valuable interactions with engineers on future projects I knew I would want to embark on. My primary passion has always been research. This feeds the hopper with inspiration for story crafting, character development, and general high design solutions. I'd research into areas of particular fascination, and re-interpret the essence of discoveries into freshly re-crafted modern myths, which is my meta-passion.

What did you enjoy playing?

When I was a kid I had a paper route as a job and I had to deliver newspapers at 5am in the cold winters of New England. This was before Atari or Nintendo consoles; all we had were coin-op machines in truck stops, greasy spoon diners, ice cream shops… These were also the places to stop along the route that were warm and dry. I was paid in quarters, and way too many of those quarters went into the arcade machines in a mission to get my three initials on to the machines leaderboard and keep them there. The games were *Grand Prix*, *Tank Command*, *Asteroids*, *Defender*, *Joust*. Later, when consoles came along, I still enjoyed the arcade games most. Today I think *Resogun* best captures my first love for arcade classics.

I DIDN'T PLAY SPORTS BECAUSE MY PARENTS DIDN'T WANT TO PAY DOCTOR BILLS FOR BROKEN BONES OR TEETH

What was it about games that fascinated you?

I think it was a way to be good at something and to be recognised for it while having fun at the same time. I was a competitive kid, but I didn't play sports because my parents didn't want to pay doctor bills for broken bones or teeth. As soon as I could walk I loved doing

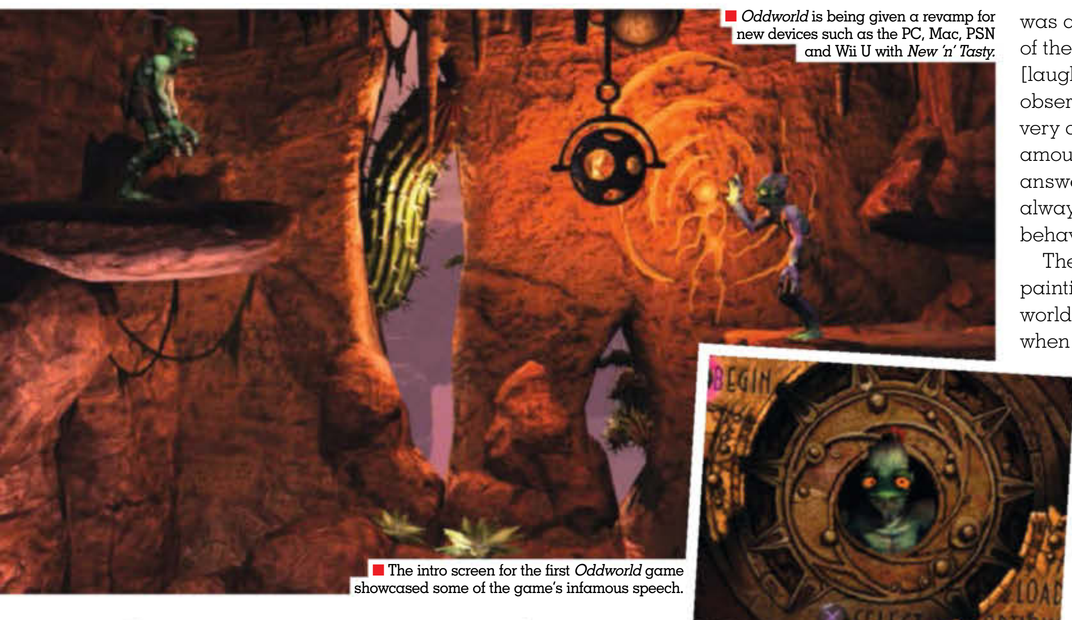


A remade version of *Munch's Oddysee* by Just Add Water.

DEVELOPER COMMENTS

■■■ Even before I met Lorne for the first time in 2009, I knew he had focus in whatever it is he worked on, purely from the attention to detail in all four of the *Oddworld* titles released up until that point. Since meeting him, not only has he been a colleague but he's a friend too and my initial perception about him all those years ago was spot on. He is an extraordinary director, he wants to know every aspect of the production of the games and he pays attention to the details of them, dotting the i's and crossing the t's. Over the years we have probably spent around 20 hours just driving around parts of California talking about game ideas and business models. Lorne is definitely a unique one of a kind character and this industry is richer for having him in it!

STEWART GILRAY, FOUNDER OF JUST ADD WATER



Oddworld is being given a revamp for new devices such as the PC, Mac, PSN and Wii U with *New 'n' Tasty*.

The intro screen for the first *Oddworld* game showcased some of the game's infamous speech.

dangerous things so I think they were tired of me always breaking, cutting, or spraining some body part or another. So I think the arcade machine was a public-displayed, honest way to have victories that even enemies couldn't deny.

You studied photorealism and commercial illustration – what did that entail?

Its greatest value was in learning how to see not what you think you see, but what is actually before you. I was taught and later found to be true, that this way of seeing has tremendous value across a wide spectrum of life. You have to train hard to get past your logical mind (your left brain) to see the truth in reality before your eyes, which means getting past the dominance of the logical mind to get clearer perceptions capable in the right brain only. The left brain does not see clearly, the right brain does. It's the left brain that is polluted with assumptions and pre-conceived notions of what it believes to be truth.

In photorealism, aside from the chemical process and technical craft, it's more about observing the true behaviour and physics of light, atmosphere and their visible effects that bounce around physical matter. To observe it, you must come to understand the core principles at work, then you can deduce what it is exactly that you are looking at.

Photorealists learn that most people do not see reality. They see symbolic assumptions of what they believe to be reality. And nowhere does the difference between perception and delusion become more evident than in someone's attempt at photorealism. Doing it well is impossible to fake if all you have is a blank canvas and oil paints to have to then walk away with a perceived photograph.

What did this training teach you?

It has left me greatly valuing the discipline demanded and benefits gained most by learning to see the world through the right brain as well as the though the left. With it comes far more benefits in life than just a summary of skills gained toward the craft of painting. If there's a downside, I think it follows that you are indeed seeing the world differently than most people around you are, and that in itself can make for a more lonely and isolated existence for those who embark down the path of this craft. But I also believe this is where deeper understandings into natural history and shamanism help reveal how indigenous cultures valued this ability in more meaningful ways and of greater benefit to the society at large. Something Western cultures are greatly lacking yet in desperate need of.

Had you been interested in animation for a long time?

[I have] a BFA in Motion Graphics, while unofficially I minored in animation. This was at CalArts. The California Institute of the Arts, also known as the other CIA [laughs]. Mostly, I spent a lot of time observing nature throughout my life. I'm very close to it and I spent a tremendous amount of time doing this. I found many answers here to many things, and so I was always absolutely fascinated by life forms, behaviours, the patterns and rhythms.

Then, once I came to realise that painting could lead to the creation of virtual worlds and animated characters, that's when I stopped painting in New York and went back to school in California to learn how film effects and animation were done. It melded lifelong passions while it was a later discovery that I could actually be an animator, so it combined many passions quite naturally.

Having met Sherry McKenna, you founded Oddworld Inhabitants in 1994. Why the move into games?

It was the only place I could figure out three things. First of all, I could tell stories I wanted to tell with creative freedom. Secondly, these stories could be told using 3D CG and thirdly there was a chance to control the stories' destiny by owning the IP as Disney, Lucas, Henson, Dr. Seuss had proven could be done.

What gave you the idea for Abe's story in Oddworld?

The backdrop was born out of insights into the deep, dark side of globalisation practices that I witnessed first hand to be psychopathically destroying our natural eco-systems that I had come to learn from, love and respect so much. Enslaved and exploited people and creatures from around the world formed the inspiration for the characters.

Did you want to produce an alien world?

I never saw myself or our efforts as producing alien worlds. I saw us producing our world disguised as alien so it would be more digestible.



Poor Abe. All he ever wanted was a quiet life.



We're not the only ones holding out for an all-new adventure.

You stuck with 2D for *Oddworld* – why?
Because we wanted to focus more on graphical richness and fidelity in animation. We wanted characters that felt more alive traversing worlds that looked richer and more interesting to engage. It was the PSone era and we were faced with choices using bitmaps or real time 3D. Real time 3D looked like it was coming from 'Planet Low Poly', which was still the maximum real time capability of the day.

You lent your voice to *Oddworld*. Did you train as a voice actor?
Only in the shower and by being a natural goofball. But then as a baby I always did love making voice effects. I was a magpie and I just loved emulating sounds from the environment. Especially when it would talk back. As a little kid spending days on creeks and streams and rivers, I would spend hours having ongoing exchanges with wild animals.

Then there were sirens. Police, fire, medical, alarms, I was awesome at them by four-years-old. I could completely freak my mother out. I could replicate any siren at a freaky decibel level. It would just scare the hell out of her and she would get so pissed. But then my voice changed with adolescence and those fun skills greatly reduced in ability. But as a five year old, I was great. [laughs] I could make anyone driving the car have a coronary. Unsuspecting adults were putty in my hands. It was an awesome superpower. Probably my only one. I do miss it dearly.

Which do you prefer – design or scripts?
In my mind, writing has always been simply a different technical expression of design. A different tool of design. I approach script-writing as a designer first. It can infuriate writers that want the more special sauce auteur approach. I want systems that then get flowered with words. I never start with words. I start with mind maps. I design stories and character development at a mind mapped graphical level. Words come into play later, after the structure of the story and its arcs have been solved on a timeline. Only then do I start to actually write. It's more like how DNA contains the instructions that will build a body to come. I build the blueprint first, then flesh out the body words.

How many people did you have working on the first game?
Up to around 50.

I WASN'T INTERESTED IN GAME DESIGN PRE-32-BIT BECAUSE I WANTED HIGHER FIDELITY IN PRODUCTION DESIGN

Did the company grow in number quite considerably?
At its largest it got up to around 80.

What was it like to work on these games?
Brutal, with extremely dense learning curves filled with relentless lessons. Invaluable, but very difficult.

Were you pleased by the reaction?
Absolutely, but not as much with other mishaps happening simultaneously. The retail chain is a very difficult terrain to navigate well when trying to get product onto the shelf across global territories. You get wins in some areas and losses in others.

***Oddworld* coincided with the PlayStation's release. Was that deliberate?**
What we did do deliberately was target CD-ROM as the spec for emerging consoles that would enable us more memory capacity and video capabilities. The obvious target in 1994 was the soon-to-emerge PSone and so we had high hopes for its success.



■ The punishing difficulty of the *Oddworld* games rarely detracted from their charm.

■ *Stranger's Wrath 2* remains a distinct possibility.

Would *Oddworld* have worked as well on older systems?
It would have been different, as the medium would have been different. But basically I wasn't interested in game design pre-32-bit because I wanted higher fidelity in production design. The 8-bit and 16-bit graphics just didn't interest me as a creator, even though I loved a number of the games. But as a craftsman, the medium didn't get that interesting to me until 32-bit. But then again, I was playing around in military simulators networked in real time 3D dog fights while others were playing the 'new' NES. So I had a different vision of where high-end military games already were and were consoles would eventually get to.

In 2008, you made a return to gaming. Why was this?
We started getting the games on to Steam and digital networks which meant independence from crappy publishing terms that ruled the previous era, which we had grown tired of playing around with.

So I've been playing more of a self published role building businesses across networks for our games, than the role of designer. This enabled us to grow the ability to start financing new content on our own but we had to do it slowly and cleverly, and only now am I diving deep back into design and development on brand new content which I've not yet disclosed.

Which game holds the fondest memories?
Stranger's Wrath. It was the first game I think I actually enjoyed building. It was brutal and had a ton of challenges, but the collective team was amazing to work with and we accomplished a ton in relatively short time. We accomplished it for around $14 million: far more than some of the biggest publishers where unable to deliver even with budgets of $50-60 million.

You have promised many other games along the way – what happened to them?
We talked about games we would have liked to build, hoped to build, or that we were actively building but got cancelled in development. Shit happens, but I've learned from experience it's best not to stir it up fresh.

RETRO RELICS

UNCOVERING GAMING'S MOST PRIZED ARTIFACTS

THE HALLOWED ARCHIVES of videogame history have become a veritable paradise for the humble collector. In an industry that absolutely adores publishing limited editions, exclusive content and stuffing all manner of supplementary gubbins into retail products, it's no surprise that many of these special issues have become heavily coveted and highly valued, some even drawing six-figure sums from eager antiquarians and collectors.

So dust off those old NES cartridges, delve into the box of forgotten gaming peripherals and join us as we take a look at some of the most sought-after collectable items that you probably don't have and can never afford.



1990 NINTENDO WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS: GOLD EDITION

Year: 1990 Worth: £60,000

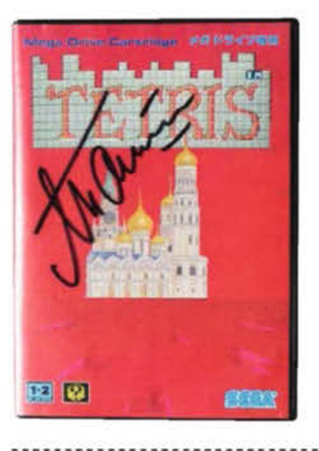
THERE'S AN INFAMOUS gaming tournament that took place in Los Angeles in the Nineties, not wholly unlike the preposterous showdown at the un-epic climax of nonsense kids gumph The Wizard, where contestants had to compete in a score-attack challenge across three Nintendo games (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Rad Racer* and *Tetris*) completed within a short time limit. 90 grey cartridges of this compilation were given out to contestants, but even rarer is the gold version, 26 of which were given away as a prize in *Nintendo Power* magazine. The competition was restricted to residents of North America and the last one sold at auction for just north of $100,000.



DONKEY KONG COUNTRY/ STARFOX: SUPER WEEKEND COMPETITION CARTRIDGES

Year: 1994 Worth: £600 – £900 each

MUCH LIKE THE Nintendo World Championship's competition cart, these two modified versions of *Donkey Kong Country* and *Starfox* were used for competitions in the US during the mid-Nineties. Around 2,500 were made for *Donkey Kong* and slightly less than that of *Starfox*, they remain two of the rarest official SNES releases. But if you're looking for the rarest competition cart in existence, then the Genesis Competition Cart (featuring *NBA Jam Tournament Edition* and *Judge Dredd*) takes the medal, with only a handful known to exist.



TETRIS (MEGA DRIVE)

Year: 1989 Worth: £10,000

TETRIS IS POPULAR among collectors for a series of well-known hard-to-find ports, but the most coveted is the short-lived Mega Drive version developed in Japan. Only around ten copies are thought to be produced (after an ensuing legal battle gave Nintendo exclusive rights), one of which, signed by *Tetris* creator Alexey Pajitnov, was listed on eBay for $1,000,000 back in 2011. Unsurprisingly, it didn't sell. Nevertheless, this one-of-a-kind edition is certainly worth more than any of item on this list.

GAMMA-ATTACK

Year: 1983 Worth: £12,000-£30,000

ONE OF THE rarest videogames ever made, only a handful of copies of this Atari 2600 game were published. The only copy known to exist appeared at auction several years ago at a Buy-It-Now price of $500,000 – an astronomical demand that was not met. However, it is valued today at somewhere between $20,000 and $50,000, which easily makes it one of the most valuable retro collectables in the world.



Gamma-Attack is the only game that Gammation is known to have released.



HOT SLOTS/BUBBLE BATH BABES/PEEK-A-BOO POKER

Year: 1990/1991 Worth: £300-£800 each

■ SUCH SMUTTY MATERIAL was never going to receive the Nintendo gold Seal of Approval, which is why publisher Panesian distributed its NES trilogy of risqué puzzles games through mail-order and video shops. Given that these were packaged and sold like VHS tapes, rather than traditional NES games, many of these found themselves at the bottom of the bargain bin in US video rental stores and their value continues to rise as what limited copies that are available (in their original packaging) have become increasingly difficult to track down.



AERO FIGHTERS 3

Year: 1995 Worth: £18,000

■ A US VERSION of Japanese shoot-'em-up *Sonic Wings 3*, this Neo Geo AES offering was previously thought to be unreleased until copies surfaced in 2012 via an ex-SNK employee. Since then a couple have sold for five figure sums, although there's much debate about the authenticity of these sales, given the increasing rise in bootleg and knock-off copies of classic titles. Still, if real, *Aero Fighters 3* is thought to be among one of the rarest games in the world.



■ The sharp-eyed will notice that this is the original Sega Saturn design. The Pluto is much more rectangular, resembling a Nineties VHS player.

SEGA PLUTO

Year: Mid-Nineties Worth: £10,000

■ A CONSOLE THAT no one thought existed until last year, the Sega Pluto was an updated version of the Sega Saturn, with a built-in NetLink modem. The console never saw commercial release and only two are known to exist in the entire world – one by an ex-employee of Sega and the other by a lucky collector who bought it for $1 at a car boot sale. The latter unsuccessfully tried to sell it on eBay (where the offer of $15,500 failed to meet the reserve price) and it's unclear whether or not the seller has since been successful in selling the ultra-rare piece of Sega history.

IF YOU OWN ONE IN ITS PACKAGING, YOU COULD BE LOOKING AT $500



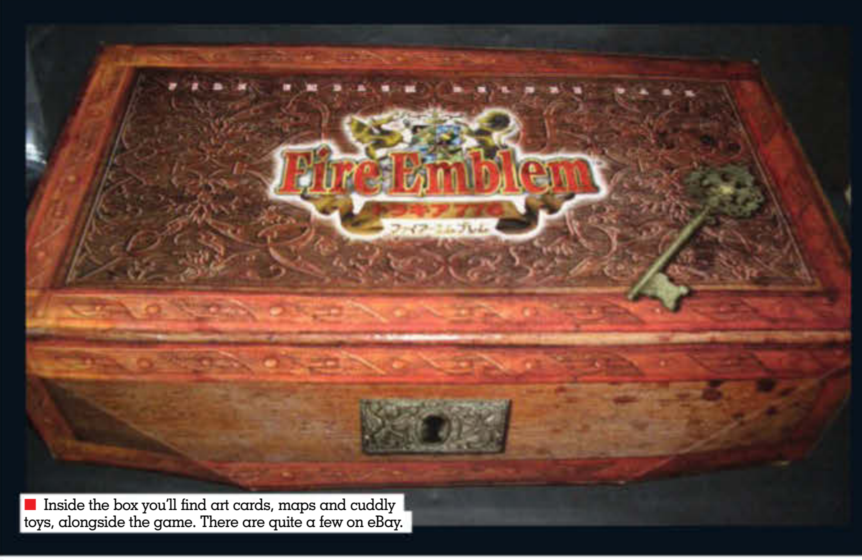
■ Vectrex games came supplied with colour overlay sheets to compensate for the limitations of the screen.

© image Evan Amos

VECTREX ARCADE SYSTEM

Year: 1982 Worth: £250-£300

■ ONE IN A long line of hardware failures that have since been forgotten by the industry, the Vectrex Arcade system bucked the trend of the non-portable home console by including a vector display in a vein attempt to bring the arcade experience into the living room. It's become something of a collectors item in subsequent years and if you happen to own one in its original packaging then you could be looking at around $500 in the US, which, when you adjust the original 1982 retail price of $199 for inflation (around $470), isn't a huge profit. Still, not bad for something that might be knocking around in the attic.



■ Inside the box you'll find art cards, maps and cuddly toys, alongside the game. There are quite a few on eBay.

FIRE EMBLEM: THRACIA 776 BOX SET

Year: 1999 Worth: £250

■ RELEASED IN 1999, *Fire Emblem: Thracia 776* is the fifth instalment in the series and is also the third and final *Fire Emblem* title released on the SNES. Few collectables on this list can claim to be this cute and cuddly; released during the height of *Fire Emblem*'s popularity in Japan, this boxset for SNES' *Fire Emblem: Thracia 776* was a veritable treasure trove for eager fans of the series. Bundled with soft toys, maps, posters and other sundry items alongside the game, it has become one of the most endearing Nintendo collectable items. Copies regularly appear posted up for auction on eBay, with the price varying between sellers.

CAPCOM POWER SYSTEM CHANGER

Year: 1994 Worth: £420-£600

■ CAPCOM'S ANSWER TO the Neo Geo AES, the Capcom Power System Changer was the company's attempt to bring its catalogue of arcade games into the living room. This adapter could interface with Capcom's existing CPS-1 arcade boards and featured a couple of controllers, but it never quite sparked consumer interest – mainly due to its high price tag and the high-quality console ports that already existed – and was eventually abandoned completely by Capcom a couple of years later. Considering it was available for nearly two years, it's strange that so few appear to be in the wild and it's rare to see one sold at auction. Still, those that are looking to buy one can expect to pay north of $700 for the pleasure.



■ Capcom didn't find much success bringing arcade titles to the CPS Changer – it fared better porting them.



ATARI JAGUAR VR HEADSET

Year: 1996 Worth: £10,000

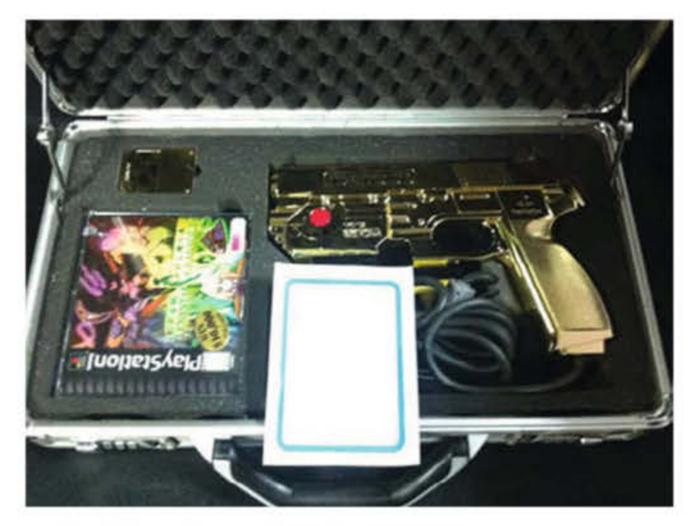
■ THE ATARI JAGUAR wasn't short of ill-fated peripherals, but the most notorious was the VR Headset that the company prototyped in the mid-Nineties. After Atari merged with JTS in 1996, it's thought that most of these were destroyed, however a couple in working condition have emerged over the years, becoming one of the most desirable videogame peripherals of all time (sorry *Rez*'s Trance Vibrator).

BANGAI-O: PRIZE EDITION

Year: 1999 Worth: £900



■ SPECIAL EDITIONS OF Japanese shoot-'em-ups often fetch a decent price at auction, but one of the rarest has to be the *Prize Edition* of Treasure's formidable *Bangai-O*, that was given out to exactly five people as a top prize in a Japanese high-score competition. Unlike other competition iterations created as exclusive prizes by developers, the only difference here is the packaging – more specifically a sticker on the Dreamcast box that declares it a winner's prize. Very few have been sold in the past but it's not outside the realm of possibility that a copy would sell today way past its estimated worth.



ELEMENTAL GEARBOLT: ASSASSIN'S CASE

Year: 1998 Worth: £11,000-£12,000

A PRIZE GIVEN out at E3 in 1998, this extremely limited edition version of PSone oddity *Elemental Gearbolt* (only 40 are thought to have been produced) includes the game in a briefcase alongside a gold GunCon light gun and a gold memory card. Not many of these have appeared at auction and the last one that did received bids up to around $18,000 before the seller eventually backed out.

The concept of *Steel Battalion*'s controller is absolutely ludicrous but it was quite successful in its own right.



STEEL BATTALION WITH CONTROLLER

Year: 2002 Worth: £120

ONE OF THE most infamous peripherals of all time, *Steel Battalion*'s massive controller features nearly 40 buttons (because the Xbox pad's 20-odd wasn't enough) and is designed to replicate the complexity of controlling a mech. The original production run sold out quickly, but was later re-released in another limited batch with blue buttons to distinguish it from the original controller.



A MONSTER DISCOVERY

We talk to retro gaming enthusiast and avid collector Richard Lloyd

What lead you to find the second known copy of *Parody World: Monster Party* in the world?
Basically, I have a little hobby of selling retro Japanese games on eBay. I've been doing it a little while now for something to do between the day job hours (they are very irregular). In terms of finding the second cart, I was very, very lucky. I bought a lot off Yahoo Japan and at the bottom of the box was this random cart I had never seen before and it turned out to be the *Monster Party* prototype.

This particular box had been sitting in my spare room a little while as the top carts were vile – they'd quite obviously been in storage a long time. After doing a little research I realised I had unearthed a gem and started getting advice about what to do with it.

Why is the game so rare?
This game is rare because it is a prototype of an unreleased Japanese game. Although *Monster Party* was released in the US, the Japanese version was canned. Nobody really knows why, but it seems that it could have been copyright issues due to it being *Parody World: Monster Party* – there are many references to famous movies, characters, etc. I'm not sure what happened to the original developers too – Shinsei. Apart from the cart I sold, there is only one other that has been discovered in the world. It was sold on yahoo auctions three years ago for 483,000Y (around £3000) – far more than mine. After searching the web a little, apparently the current owner had said he would never share any of the secrets on that cart – and therefore the demand of the game increased, I guess.

What are you planning to do with the game?
I did consider copying it to preserve but I don't have the equipment or knowledge to do such a thing (not to mention being unsure about the laws regarding that type of thing). The new owner has paid for the cart and it will be shipped to him in America this weekend.

What is it about collecting rare gaming artifacts that you find so exciting?
I guess your question answers itself really – these items are rare, which means only a few people will ever get to own/play them. For some it is that, for some, maybe an investment. I am not sure. Personally, I think games are fun, but I wouldn't want the pressure of owning one such as this – it was too much.

ESSENTIALS

10 IMPOSSIBLE STRUCTURES

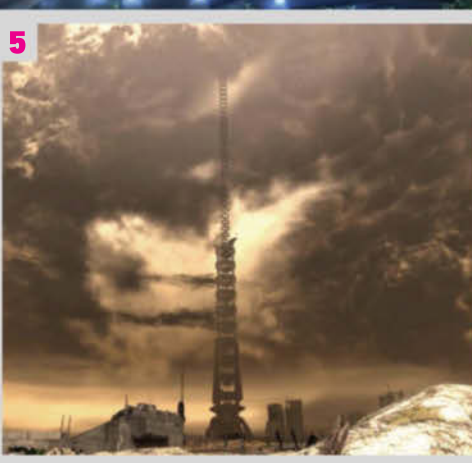
One of the best things about videogames is their ability to put us in worlds we'd never imagine seeing in real life. From the humid depths of tropical jungles to the cold expanses of outer space, games can teleport us to distant realms filled with impossible buildings. As a result, we've listed our favourite structures we've had the pleasure of visiting in games...

1


2

3


4


5


7


Death Egg
From: Sonic 3 & Knuckles

1 Though the Death Egg turns up frequently throughout the *Sonic* canon, it's appearance through the *Sonic 3 & Knuckles* games is our favourite – unashamedly based on the Death Star, Robotnik's hideout hangs intimidatingly in the sky, the villain's face unashamedly built into the very structure itself. Held in place by the power of the Master Chaos Emerald, you are able to bring the whole thing crashing to Angel Island in *Sonic 3*, and see it stuck in the Earth's crust during the Lava Reef zone later on in the game. The Egg is a staggering ball of mechanised evil – an extremely impressive and resilient orbital fortress. Darth Vader take note.

Columbia
From: BioShock Infinite

2 Constructed by Comstock to serve as his 'New Eden', the floating city of Columbia is one of the most lavishly fashioned cities we've seen in any game. Where the rest of our list tends to feature singular structures, it felt wrong to not include the entirety of this beautiful aerial city – the whole thing is resplendent and wonderful, a true paradise. Manipulating Rosalind Lutece's 'Lutece Field' to stay afloat, it's genuinely upsetting to see Booker and Elizabeth carve their path of destruction through the city during the events of the game – slay all the Vox Populi and Founders you like, just leave the streets of the city out of it.

Balamb Garden
From: Final Fantasy VIII

3 *Final Fantasy VIII* revolved around a group of students who attended a school-like institution (the Garden) to learn how to become SeeDs – mercenaries tasked with protecting the world. After missiles are launched at the school from an opposing nation, the main cast of the game break into the school's basement and trigger its alternate form – a flying fortress. After you've activated the mechanisms that allow the Garden to become airborne, it can be used to navigate the world map. We wish our school had done that – instead it was just some bleak concrete mass in the Midlands.

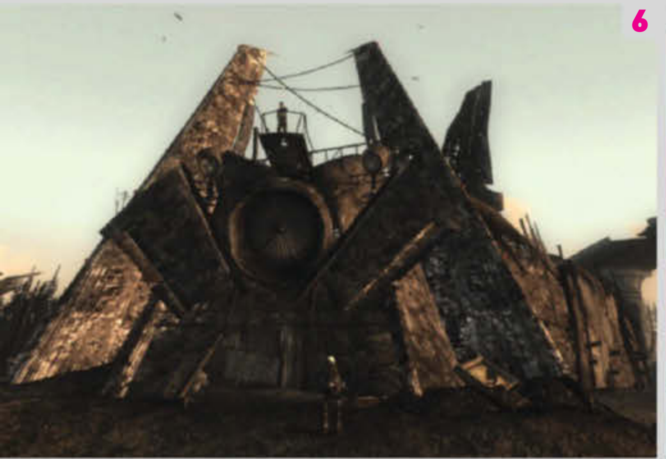
Silver Sacks Tower
From: Devil May Cry

4 The rebooted *Devil May Cry* was set in Limbo City – populated by a ravenous demon sub-world and a brainwashed, ignorant human main world. At the city's centre sits the Silver Sacks building – lair of Mundus and his inner circle of hell spawn. The building completely flies in the face of all architectural logic and forms two huge wings that span out and shadow smaller buildings beneath them. We're sure it's all very symbolic, but we cannot help but consider what a health and safety nightmare it all is – especially considering the whole thing is built around a gateway to Hell itself. How did that ever get any planning permission?

Space Elevator
From: Halo: Reach

5 Also known as a 'space tether', the imposing elevators that punctuate the skylines of *Halo*'s myriad planets were used to ferry shipments of armour, weapons or minerals to outlying space bases. There are actually concepts and bases that exist in the real world for these gigantic structures, but none of the plans look anywhere near as impressive as those you'll see in *Halo*. Estimations suggest that the structures extend to 70,000 kilometres above the Earth's surface, and the elevators are pulled taut by their parent planet's rotational inertia – keeping stable by merging with the planet's geosynchronous orbit. Or something.













Megaton
From: Fallout 3

6 Built around an undetonated nuclear bomb, Megaton is an insular little town situated in the Capital Wasteland near Vault 101. The central bomb became something of a relic to the inhabitants of the shanty town, giving birth to a cult that called themselves 'The Children of the Atom' – worshipping the nuke for the fear that it may kill them at any time. While not particularly impressive or jaw-dropping, the town made our list because who would build a city around a *bomb*? Its stupidity is the most impossible thing about it, and we were glad to see the vaporised hole in the ground after we blew everything in it to smithereens.

The Citadel
From: Mass Effect

7 The Citadel – the capital of Council Space in the *Mass Effect* mythos – is more than just a plain old floating space station located somewhere within the Serpent Nebula: it's also a Mass Relay in itself, a mode of transport capable of warping ships across the galaxy in a heartbeat. Consisting of five wards (read: arms), a presidium ring and a central tower, the Citadel can be folded in on itself, creating a virtually impenetrable shell – the perfect location for defending the top brass of the galaxy's hierarchies (until you realise the whole thing is just a lethal Reaper trap that happens to have been dormant for eons).

Malus
From: Shadow Of the Colossus

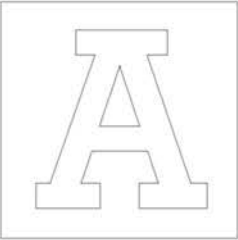
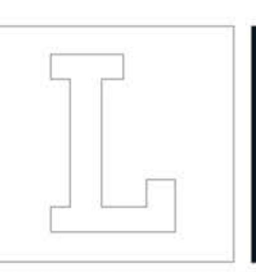
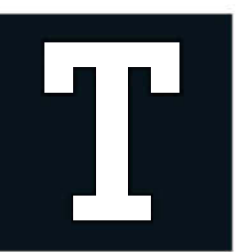
8 Malus, when you first look at it, seems like a standard monolithic tower – dumbly mute and standing guard over the wasteland ruins near the end of *Shadow Of The Colossus*. As you approach the tower, however, a storm begins to chew up the sky and Malus lights up… and begins to move. The final boss of the game, Malus itself forms a labyrinthine puzzle that must be ascended while avoiding the rain of death it's intent on firing down upon you. Even if Malus *didn't* happen to just come alive, its House of Leaves layout and mystery would still have landed it happily in our list of favourite structures in videogames. Simply incredible stuff.

Jergingha
From: The Wonderful 101

9 Part sentient super-criminal, part mobile headquarters of evil, Jergingha somehow managed to travel back in time 1,500 years in an attempt to stop Earth becoming part of the Greater Galactic Coalition – taking the form of a cybernetic brain in our time, because why not? Once the Wonderful 101 manage to destroy his first form, Jergingha equips a mask 'from the future' that transforms him into his Planet Destruct Form. We included the big bad guy here because, frankly, he seems to subvert the laws of physics – where does all that mass in his second form even come from?

The Traveler
From: Destiny

10 A strange spherical structure that one day sank into gravitational orbit around Earth, the Traveler's arrival heralded a Golden Age for space travel to the inhabitants of our humble planet. It's unknown whether the Traveler is sentient, AI or just a structure, but figuring out its ominous presence will be the driving narrative behind *Destiny*. With no clear thrusters or engines, it's a miracle that the Traveler remains aloft – is there some anti-gravitational device at its core? Is it held in place by space magic? We just don't have any answers right now, only a burning sense of curiosity. Come on, *Destiny*, why aren't you here yet?

THE 







STEELSERIES STRATUS WIRELESS CONTROLLER

MANUFACTURER: **Steelseries** PRICE: **£67.90**

WILL HARDCORE GAMING ever take off on anything other than a console or a PC? Will the mobile revolution do more for the games industry than just pollute it with the free-to-play formula? We're still waiting to see. In the mean time, though, we're seeing a variety of manufacturers cater for those that choose to sit down to their iPad and play by providing the familiar gamepad setup, reimagined for today's macro-centric world.

The Stratus is presented with a retro vibe (we think it looks like the SNES pad), and while we admire the compact nature of the design, there are times when the ergonomics of the thing felt affected by just how small it is – if you've got particularly big hands, you'll often feel like you're wrestling with the thing, bunching your fingers around the sticks and shoulder buttons (of which, admirably, there are four). For younger players or those with smaller digits, though, it's surprisingly comfortable – if you've got a kid that seizes control of your iPad or iPhone while travelling around, the Stratus is ideal.

The pad is wireless and connects to any device running iOS7 via Bluetooth, but doesn't have any touch features or gyroscopes inside, meaning games that rely on the iPad's touchscreen or tilt features aren't compatible with the device. This pad is there for games like the *GTA: San Andreas* port or *République* – traditional core games that require the multiple inputs you'd find on console games. At a price of £67.90, this SteelSeries is clearly aiming for the hardcore gamer demographic, but for a pad that only works with iOS devices, we wonder how successful it'll be.



GAMING CLOTHING



SILENT HILL 2 SUNDERLAND JACKET

If you find yourself creeping around a terrifying town fighting the repressed thoughts of the undead, at least do it in style.
http://tinyurl.com/oh7oh3x



ASSASSIN'S CREED IV JACKDAW SHIRT

This shirt is ideal for those days when all you want to do is get off your face on rum and chant sea shanties, which is all the days.
http://tinyurl.com/pwalyel



PORTAL 2 APERTURE TRACK JACKET

This track jacket is ideal if you want to run laps, over and over and over and over. Oh wait – we're just stuck in a *Portal* loop...
http://tinyurl.com/cc89dvp

PIXEL BRICKS STREET FIGHTERS

RETAILER: **FORBIDDEN PLANET** PRICE: **£7.99 EACH**

EVERYONE KNOWS LEGO, right? Well, these Pixel Bricks figures are a bit like Lego, except they don't carry that expensive licence. Rendered in a surprisingly lifelike manner, these figures can be pitted against each other, and – if you wish – broken apart brutally when a fighter concedes defeat (all you need is a bit of extra ketchup and you can make your own *Street Fighter/Mortal Kombat* mash-up). Wouldn't it be great to get Blanka and Ken and mix up their body parts, too? Or better yet, create some kind of unholy amalgamation of the two of them... We have too much time on our hands, don't we?



SUPER MARIO KART RIDE-ON

MANUFACTURER: **JAKKS PACIFIC** PRICE: **$199.99**



WE KNOW THAT the majority of our readers are probably going to be just a little too big to enjoy this kart... but you don't care about that, right? The *Mario* ride-on kart will be available in the UK in autumn, and will ship with two types of tyres – for both your on- and off-road antics (yes, really). You might want to spend the year stocking up on turtle shells, banana skins, bombs and mushrooms, then – we anticipate seeing a whole load of ridiculous YouTube videos when the kart hits our shores.

GOJI PLAY

MANUFACTURER: **BLUE GOJI** PRICE: **$99.99**

WE SIT DOWN in an office all day (we eat a *lot* of biscuits) and then when we get home, we want to squeeze as much gaming time in as we can. But we've also developed a crippling guilt complex because we think we should be more, y'know,active. Maybe go to that mythical place they call The Outside. So the Goji Play is like a dream come true for us, because it turns whatever cardio equipment you've got lying around your house into a legitimate games machine with a mobile device. Cardio is an incredibly boring way of working out if you're not doing anything else along with it, so why not use the expertise of the guys behind *Guitar Hero* to make your boring old treadmill an interactive game? The weight will just drop off you. It's a little expensive, but we're just glad a fitness/gaming thing exists that isn't Wii-based.





CHAT

Talking to shadowy industry figures
because MMO Worlds has gone missing



ERIC POMMER

Classic Thief gameplay bought up to date

Five years in the making, The Dark Mod is a free standalone game that successfully combines the classic gameplay of Thief with Doom 3 technology

***The Dark Mod* has come a long way from being a mod as most would recognise one. Beyond being standalone, what in your opinion makes *The Dark Mod* different?**

Even back when you still needed *Doom 3* to run *The Dark Mod*, it looked like its own game. Other than a few sounds and particle effects, you couldn't recognize anything from *Doom 3* in it. We completely redesigned AI behaviour, added our own stealth mechanics, and created a huge library of unique assets, including character models, animations, and textures. It was a massive undertaking. Now that *The Dark Mod* is completely standalone, it isn't really a mod anymore. But it's too late to change the name!

How difficult has it been getting the game to the stage it is today? What was it like for you when you started?

When we first started, we had a team of about a dozen regulars and two dozen contributors that would help out when they could. Because we were changing so many things about *Doom 3*, we needed talented people in just about every area of game design. We were very lucky to land a couple fantastic programmers early on, and we definitely wouldn't have gotten where we are today without them.

What's your take on the new *Thief*?

I think it's clear that Eidos has taken a different approach than we did with *The Dark Mod*. They seem to have drifted away from the "immersive sim" focus of the earlier *Thief* games, where freedom and player choice were paramount, and have instead put a lot of effort into leading you through a story. We're lucky with *The Dark Mod*, because we're free to target a limited audience of hardcore stealth gamers. When you're dealing with triple-A budgets, you have to try and appeal to as many people as possible, and sometimes that backfires.

Which is your favourite of the *Thief* games so far and why?

My personal favourite is *The Dark Project*. I loved the variety of the missions and the strong sense of wonder I felt exploring all the different elements of the setting. *The Metal Age* was pretty great too, though I wasn't a fan of the robots. *Deadly Shadows* had its moments, but it was disappointing in a number of ways – which was actually the reason we started making *The Dark Mod* in the first place. The first two games really had something special, and our goal was to bring a little of that to a more modern engine. Given the positive response we've gotten from the stealth community, I think we've been successful!





There are dozens of player-created scenarios for the *The Dark Mod*, many based on levels from the classic games.



Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team

Editor **Richard Shoemaker**
richard.shoemaker@imagine-publishing.co.uk ☎ 01202 586259
Editor In Chief **Nick Roberts**
Features Editor **David Scarborough**
Staff Writer **Dom Peppiatt**
Senior Art Editor **Andy Downes**
Assistant Designer **Megan Davis**
Sub Editor **Rebecca Richards**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Head of Publishing **Aaron Asadi**
Head of Design **Ross Andrews**

Contributors

Luke Albigés, David Crookes, Jon Denton, Matthew Edwards, Steve Holmes, Darran Jones, Ryan King, Dan Pinchbeck, Paul Presley, John Robertson, Chet Roivas, Chris Schilling, Paul Walker

Cover Image

© 2013 CD PROJEKT S.A.

Advertising

Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Advertising Director Matthew Balch ☎ 01202 586437
matthew.balch@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Head of Sales Hang Deretz ☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell ☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International

games™ is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities.
Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401 licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Subscriptions

Head of Subscriptions Gill Lambert
For subscription enquiries email:
gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk
☎ UK 0844 848 8429
☎ Overseas +44 1795 592 864
13 issue subscription UK – £52.00
13 issue subscription Europe – £70.00
13 issue subscription ROW – £80.00

Circulation

Head of Circulation Darren Pearce ☎ 01202 586200

Production

Production Director Jane Hawkins ☎ 01202 586200

Founders

Group Managing Director Damian Butt
Group Finance & Commerical Director Steven Boyd

Printing & Distribution

Printed by Wyndeham Heron Ltd, Bentalls Complex, Colchester Road, Heybridge, Maldon, Essex, CM9 4NW
☎ 01621 877 777
Distributed in the UK and Eire by Seymour Distribution, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT ☎ 020 7429 4000
Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch, Equinox Centre, 18 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, NSW 2086
☎ +61 2 9972 8800
Distributed in the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU
☎ 020 3148 8105

ISSN 1478-5889

IMAGINE PUBLISHING





12,618
1 Jan - 31 Dec 2013



GAMES™ RISES
AGAIN
24 APRIL


The city is my mask
THIEF™
BUY NOW AT hmv
THIEFGAME.COM
/THIEF
16
www.pegi.info
PC
AMD
PS4.
PS3
PlayStation 3
XBOX ONE
XBOX 360
eidos
MONTRÉAL
SQUARE ENIX.
Thief © 2014 Square Enix Ltd. All rights reserved. Developed by Eidos-Montréal. THIEF, the THIEF logo, EIDOS-MONTRÉAL and the EIDOS logo are trademarks of Square Enix Ltd. SQUARE ENIX and the SQUARE ENIX logo are trademarks or registered trademarks of Square Enix Holdings Co., Ltd. "", "Playstation" and "PS3" are registered trademarks of Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. "PS4" is a trademark of the same company. AMD, the AMD Arrow logo, Radeon and combinations thereof are trademarks of Advanced Micro Devices, Inc. All rights reserved. All other trademarks are the property of their respective owners.


THE UK'S BIGGEST MODERN POPULAR CULTURE SHOW
MCMEXPO
Comics
Manga
Anime
Movies
Cosplay
Video Games
23-25 May 2014
Excel London
MCM LONDON
COMIC CON
MCM
eSports
A fantastic family day out - KIDS GO FREE*
ADVANCE PRIORITY ENTRY TICKETS AVAILABLE
WWW.MCMCOMICCON.COM
Part of MCMEXPO GROUP
*Kids Go Free, Children 10 and Under go free if accompanied by a paying adult. Max 2 free children per adult, applies to General Entry tickets from 11am each day.
Photo credit Martin Walter